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Vampire Bites:
Vampire Paranormal Romance Boxed Set
Vampire Bites Series

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Book One

Erzabet Bishop
Muffy Wilson
Kallysten
Bethany Shaw
Danielle Gavan
Xandra James
Kiki Howell
Angelica Dawson
Phoenix Johnson
Gina Kincade

Naughty Nights Press ● Canada

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Note To Our Amazing Readers

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Vampire Bites: Vampire Paranormal Romance Boxed Set
Vampire Bites Anthology Series
Book One
First Edition June 2016
ISBN: 978-1-926514-42-0
Published by Naughty Nights Press, LLC
http://naughtynightspress.com/
Credit to the individual editors of each author.

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The Vampire's Witch by Kiki Howell

The Willows is a resort town run by vampires, werewolves and witches. Here, their true identities are kept secret from humans, and intimate relations between the individual clans are strictly forbidden.

When it becomes known that the vampire Amberlyn has fallen in love with the werewolf Kane, the tedious line of their co-existence has been crossed. Caught in the crossfire of this revelation, Drake, the vampire clan leader and Amberlyn's maker, is killed along with an innocent witch. These deaths spark a series of horrific events leading to an all out War In The Willows.

Unexpected close encounters, bodies ripe with need, and situations beyond their control lead to forbidden relationships. Now three vampires, a witch, a werewolf and a human must ride along the edges of the rules. They will attempt once unthinkable romantic entanglements despite all those who oppose their relationships, while fighting for their lives as well.

With the Willows full of violence and bloodshed, meetings and magic amiss, will the clans ever be able to find peace among them again? Or, will this war destroy the Willows?

In Book 1, Amberlyn's vampire brother, Isaac, always one to kick ass first and deal with the consequences later, kidnaps a witch, Winter. He intends to find out what type of retaliation the witch clan is planning against the vampires and werewolves. In doing so, he finds so much more then he bargained for.

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The Vampire's Witch by Kiki Howell
At War In The Willows: Book One
eISBN: 978-1-927415-12-2
First Edition 2012
Release Date: March 2012
Published by Naughty Nights Press
http://naughtynightspress.com/
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The Vampire's Witch by Kiki Howell

CHAPTER ONE

Rage carried Isaac from California back to Tennessee at a fevered speed even for a vampire. The night curled in around him, but not as the embrace it usually was. Instead, tonight, it was like a dense fog, which seemed to strangle him. He couldn't say he was going home, even though that was where his families were. Both of them, or at least, what was left of them. Home meant a place that welcomed, sheltered, and yet he'd had no choice but to run from The Willows. Even now, several years later, he would have to be careful while staying with his vampire family that his real family never saw him. For all his birth family knew, he'd gone missing a decade ago. Hopefully they thought him dead—an accurate conception for all intents and purposes.

The voice of his maker's maker, Achim, a man he viewed as a grandfather now, echoed in his head. Drake, Isaac's maker, was dead, staked outside the business he'd run. *The Willows* was to the mortals a peaceful, beautiful resort area in the mountains of Tennessee, full of sun and water and trails in the summer, which switched to snowboarding and skiing in the winter, everything a tourist could want. His clan had moved there a few years before he was made. While vampires were transient, forced to always keep moving every few decades or so by the fact mortals started to question why they never aged, resort towns were perfect to keep the questions low with so many people always coming and going. Plus, these types of places provided them jobs running the always-active nightlife.

Clans of werewolves and witches had already been in *The Willows* when his clan had arrived. Until tonight, the clans had basically kept

apart, recognized and peacefully accepted their hatred for each other. They worked together, amicable enough in public, but that was where it ended. Tonight, his vampire sister, Amberlyn, had thought it wise to reveal her love for the werewolf, Kane, of all given creatures. A verbal battle between vampires and werewolves at the cove had turned violent and deadly. A young witch who was in the wrong place at the wrong time, had been killed by a shot that had been fired after a werewolf had staked to death Amberlyn's and Isaac's maker, Drake. While the wolf and vamp clans had all but declared war, the witches were already threatening their own special sort of revenge. All of this had happened in the matter of three cursed hours. Now, he was nearly there just a few hours away from sunrise.

Isaac, even in life, had been one to kick ass and ask questions later. As he entered *The Willows* – the place eerily quiet – a chill, more pervasive than it should be for a spring night in these parts, snaked down his back as he approached the group of houses where most of the witches lived.

"Blessed wenches," he grumbled into the air. And, he meant that in an angry, jealous and missed the sun type of way. Witches got to have special abilities and easily blend into society as mere mortals. His boot crushed the yellows, pinks and whites of the spring flowers, which decorated the first lawn he'd come to. They represented spring fever and love, and he relished their demise under his boots.

"Fuckin' Amberlyn!" Isaac had never gotten to know his sister much, except through a few visits when her, Drake, and Drake's maker, Achim with his wife, Willa, had come to visit him in Los Angeles.

Someone was going to pay for Drake's death. Isaac wasn't going to be picky either. Whatever witch he came across first would do for information, then possibly revenge depending on how things went down. Revenge was his job in California, and he was very good at it. Tonight though, he hadn't thought his plan of attack all the way through yet.

His thoughts were still more on what he'd lost tonight. After Isaac had been made, Drake had left *The Willows* with Isaac, stayed with

him, mentored him, became a real father to replace the human one he could no longer see. Isaac pushed the memories aside, squashed them with anger-laced pain. First things first, before that damn strong sun around here rose, some random witch was going to give him answers about what they had planned. He would go for the werewolves tomorrow night after he had a planning session with Amberlyn and Achim. Isaac had promised them that over the phone. No one had said a damn word about the witches. Being one of the new temporary leaders of the clan now – as one of those closest in bloodline to Drake – he had a job to protect the other vampires.

With strength and speed, he broke into the house. There was no lock or doorknob around that could keep him out if he wanted in. The broken door, the briefest scream of a woman startled out of sleep, were all but seconds, and he was gone. With a hand over the scared-frozen woman's mouth just in case, he erred on the side of caution somewhat, even though she wouldn't realize what had happened to her. He ran through the woods with her in his arms at speeds that made her world blur.

He came to a stop when he reached the abandoned cave, now secretly furnished with a man-made room deep inside it where no mortal would dare roam. Drake had lived there, a home away from the one he claimed to live in, in town. Achim had told Isaac he could stay there safely out of sight for as long as he needed to be in *The Willows*. He used the code to get inside.

Once the door had shut and bolted behind him, he threw the witch on the leather couch, wondered what magic she could possess to have shocked his whole body just from holding her. Something about the electric sensation that burned through his veins felt familiar, calmed and energized at the same time. It was the first time since he'd been turned that he'd felt, well, secure of all damn things. It was almost too foreign of an emotion to recognize. If he didn't know better, he would say it felt like something he remembered from home, from the last time he was here, the night he died. Stupid, but seriously undeniable still, like something long ago but never forgotten, always longed for even if pushed from one's mind. And, on tonight of all nights, the

whole idea of home was insane. He'd just lost the one person who'd ever given him any sense of the word since becoming a vampire. Security had now become an even more vague concept than it had ever been before, a concept he would think upon only when in a piss-poor mood about the loss of his cushy childhood and all-too-soon-gone days of being a carefree young man.

The feeling had to have something to do with being in Drake's home. That had to be it. Although he'd only been here once before, that dreadful night he'd been turned and a few nights following, until Drake had thought he was strong enough to travel to California and start a new life there. Secure wasn't a word he'd use to describe those first nights he'd spent as a vamp, but the place was Drake's still. He could sense him here in a way.

The witch must have been beyond terrified from her journey, because she stared at him with her big green eyes that sparkled with gold, even in the dim lights. Of course she would be afraid. Beyond the whole kidnapping thing, he didn't let many people see him. He worked shady jobs at night, in the wrong parts of town, where a half-disfigured face like his got him street cred, warranted fear, and got the job done with little problem. He was one scary son of a bitch, or son of a vamp. He had used it to his advantage, but he wasn't sure how much good it would do him with this chick.

"Wasting my breath probably by saying this, but don't be scared." He pulled the hood he always wore over the side of his scared face, turned away from her at the same time. "I just want answers. Give them too me, and I'll return you to your bed. Do it quickly, and I can get you there before the sun rises." He pointed to his watch. "But, time is ticking. What are the witches planning for retaliation again the werewolf and vampire clans for what happened tonight?"

She just sat there, her red curls wind-blown from her unexpected trip, like a fire raging around her beautiful features, the ones he was losing the battle at ignoring. Against her flaming locks her pale skin glowed, everything about her sparkled. Something in his cold body warmed, unexpected, and as welcomed as it was forcefully, obediently, rejected. Slowly her legs curled up under her, hidden a bit

more by her nightdress. The damn thing was sheer, of course, thin strapped, a sunny, golden color, appropriate to sheath such a bright – okay hot – woman as she was.

Fuckin' stop it! What the hell with the thoughts? Is this some sort of magic she's using on me already? Damn it all! What the hell is she staring at?

She was under his skin, possessed him, some goddamned fucking way, and it needed to stop. *Yes. That had to be it. Possession.* He had to wonder though if it was really possible as she sat there, her arms around her body. She curled into the corner of the couch, stared at him like he was some sort of angelic being, like he mesmerized her rather than feared him like most did in his presence as if he was mere devil's spawn.

Of course, it has to be part of some spell. What else? She doesn't need a wand or words. These witches are wicked with mind control. He'd fight fire with fire if he only had the mind to at the moment. *What the fuck?*

"If you're using magic, you need to stop it now!" he yelled, finally made his thoughts vocal, but they'd come out more like a muffled roar. The witch emasculated him. She literally had him by the balls with her magic, and he wouldn't have it. His fangs came out, his face tense.

She jumped, and he bit back the apology that came unasked for by her and un-welcomed by him.

"You're alive," she finally spoke, words so faint he wasn't sure he'd heard her right.

"What?" he barked back, the tone of it far less than he'd planned it to be. He huffed.

"The last time I saw you. You were in that accident…that horrible, horrendous car accident." She shook her head, her eyes closed tight. He wondered if she tried to recall a moment or shut out a memory. "They used magic…They tried to… I tried to… I didn't know what happened to you, if they were successful…or I was. Then that vampire, he just took you. Oh My Goddess!"

Her hand went over her mouth a second, then dropped again. "That vampire was Drake! Your maker… that's why you're here. I'm so sorry

for your loss."

He shook his head then, his fangs shortened. *Sorry for my loss? Was she for real?*

"What are you talking about? My accident? You remember it?" He actually shook his head again tried to focus in on a lot of words that, as he understood them, made no sense. Not a damnable drop of sense. "Yes, Drake's dead. That's why I got you. I just need information about what the witches are planning in retaliation. In exchange I'll return you safely."

"I wish I had it to give, the information you seek, that is." Her legs unfurled then long and shapely. He wondered how anyone's skin could look so pale and so warm at the same time. In this light, her coloring made her sparkle like a fairy. She tugged what she could of the golden silk nightgown over her thighs. His body came alive even more so than it had when he'd had her in his arms. This time what burned through his veins was pure lust. It had to be. Definitely a feeling he could identify with. But, question was, had she caused it? This ache within him to hold her, to claim her, to drink her blood, which was probably honey sweet. He could smell it as it flowed under her skin. At first in a furious rush of adrenaline, at moments it slowed down a bit, and then it moved along fast again seconds later.

And yet, he felt like he was the one with blood that rushed through his veins, more like when he had been a human. His whole body was turned on so much that he felt like a damn bee who buzzed around a queen bee in her hive. He contemplated the sting just to be able to touch her.

"You grabbed the wrong witch, I'm afraid," she stated, calmly, softly, after the silence he'd let ensue. She blew his mind. He really didn't know what to make of her. His face, his fangs, none of it scared her. Instead she came at him with concern. *What is wrong with her?*

"I'm really somewhat of an outcast," she continued as if she'd read his mind.

You never could trust a witch. A master at mind games, the whole compulsion thing going for him, today he seemed to sit on the bench, hand her over the win.

“I don’t like to play with magic like most of them do,” she shook her head slightly as she spoke, gave him a half-smile, one shy and demure. “I don’t shrug off the moral laws just because I have the power to easily do so. So, I’m told little by my clan. If they didn’t need my powers, I swear they wouldn’t even invite me to their circles half the time. I know though that your kind, the wolves too, they need to be on alert. They had a meeting before bed, one of their planning sessions that never amount to anything good. And, this time they were hurt and angry beyond what I’ve seen them be in a long time. I wasn’t invited, but I can only imagine what was said there.”

Isaac took a few steps toward her. She didn’t even flinch. *Is she that confident in her abilities against me? Is she not scared by or even grossed out by my disfigured face?* He fell to his knees on the floor at her feet. He’d heard of necromancy, it’s use – how it let witches control vampires, made them do their will. What buzzed through him, made him want her, made him feel like he knew her? He had to find it’s source and stop it. It didn’t make sense anyway. Why would a goddess like her want a monster like him to want her so badly? She knew he was a vamp. *Surely she isn’t trying to get attacked and drained? Or, does she have a fuckin’ death wish?* She’s said she didn’t fit in, but she didn’t seem to care about the fact at the same time.

Trying to get back to the most essential point at the moment, he knew if he could block the magic, find it and stop it – and usually he was good at sensing such things – he could glamour her into giving him, or getting him if what she said was true, the information he needed. The first signs of day sleep were hit him, didn’t help his predicament at all, or keep his mind sharp and clear.

“What are you doing to me?” he tried to hiss, but it came out like he was pleading, breathy and whiny, and it would’ve infuriated him if he could find where he’d misplaced his anger. It was like he dropped the damned emotion when he’d picked her up.

“Nothing. I swear. It’s my magic—”

“I knew it!” Isaac grabbed her, his hands wrapped tight around her arms until she took in a deep breath.

“No! You don’t understand. I’m not using a spell on you. Your body,

it probably recognizes my magic from the night you died, or were changed. Please, you're hurting me. I'm not doing anything to you. I'm glad you are alive. I'm sorry if I had anything to do with your beautiful face not healing the way it should have."

Despite the fact he still had her upper arms in his hands, she moved her hand up to lightly brush aside his hood and let her fingertips move over his scarred cheek and jaw. Warmth caressed his skin, like a plush blanket just pulled from the dryer. It snapped whatever was left of his restraint like a worn rubber band. He pulled her into his arms.

He ran his hand down over her hair, luxuriated in the smooth feel of it as it twirled around his fingers. He smelled her, pulled in her warm honey scent, mixed with chamomile. Yeah, that was it, as much as he could take of her without giving into his bloodlust. It was a fine line, but he hovered over it without thought. Then, with all the willpower he had, he let her go.

"What could you have to do with my face? No one knows why when I became a vampire the supernatural healing powers that come with the change didn't work on the injuries I sustained to my face in the accident. You keep saying you were there? I don't understand. How in the hell would I know your magic, or recognize it, as I think you said?"

"I was there that night of your accident. I remember it like it was yesterday. You were just barely a man, what twenty years old?"

"Yes, exactly. How do you—?"

"I was just a teenager then," she interrupted him. She sounded like one all of the sudden too. Her voice held a high pitch of over-excitement. "I was sixteen to be exact. I saw you from time to time around town. You were back in the Willows working that summer between college semesters, right?"

"How do you know all of this about me? Were you some kind of teenage stalker?" He gave a faint laugh, the feeling vibrated in his chest, let him know he was barely breathing. Not that he needed to, but it was a habit even the dead never outgrew.

"Stalker? Well, maybe. Ah, lets say though that I was a teenager infatuated with a college guy." She waved her hand at him as if she'd

erased what she'd written on some imaginary chalkboard. "Actually, I think I secretly had a crush on you long before that. Anyway, no real need for me to embarrass myself by divulging all of that information, we – as in me and a few other young witches – were in the woods that night, the evening of your accident, we were playing with our new and growing powers, as teen witches will do. It was the full moon. Do you remember that?"

"Yes, of course. I remember every detail of that night in vivid color. I saw the moon as I lay there on the ground, as I died, a bright gray ball in the sky. I remember thinking that it was like something out of a horror movie to die under such a thing. Just one of the millions of thoughts, half sane, half not, that go through your head when you know death is coming. That night something had run out in front of my car, instinct had me swerve, and I hit a few trees – going too fast – driving like I was invincible of course, as teenage males will do. Were your spells making the animals scurry away, out into the dangerous roads?"

"I have no idea. Wasn't really a concern. Can't even say anyone thought of it. We were reckless with our gifts at first. All I know is we heard it, the accident, your car hitting the tree. The crunch of metal and wood carried in the silence. But, by the time we got there from where we were, Drake was already there with you. It looked like he was feeding from you at first, but when he bit into his own arm and squeezed the blood from his wrist into your mouth, we knew he was actually saving your life by turning you. The witches I was with took it upon themselves to see if they could prevent another vampire from being brought into this world. They wanted you just to die.

"I couldn't let that happen. You were so young, so...well, so much a thing of my fantasies, that even if you were the walking dead, it just didn't feel right to me for them to interfere. I felt protective of you. I couldn't let you go. So, I blocked their magic as best I could, me against them. Drake sensed it, the magic, and came after us. But, we hid, used an invisible spell, our only real protection against your speed if you come after us like that. Anyway, I never knew what happened to you after that, only what the town knew, that your car

had been found and your body had not."

"My face then, the reason it didn't heal like it should have, was because of the magic?"

"I can only assume. We interfered with the process, the change. At some point, they were stopping the change and I was trying to stop them. Whatever happened, the result was that you didn't heal on the outside like you did on the inside, I guess. I mean who knows what can happen when a magical sort of war is going on as a body makes the change from human to the walking dead. It's too much for even the paranormal world to reconcile, or explain, I guess. I'm sorry for my part in it."

"No, it's not your fault. Everyone there tried to alter my fate, it seems. I was meant to die from a human standpoint, which is all I was going into that night. After my conversion, to this town I had to die. Drake hid me away. I could no longer walk in the sun. There was no way to come back to my family and live among them as a vampire and explain why I couldn't go out during the day and other such things. Besides, this face, as it is now, it isn't meant for light. It works best for me in the shadows."

"No," she spoke softly. "I still see a beautiful man, a strong, intense…"

He cut in when she left off. "I'm not. I'm a monster. Don't forget that," he clipped, moving her hand from his face, because it just felt too good there. He couldn't give into that right now. It had to be her magic, something that had saved him from death; just as Drake had so his body craved it like a lifeline. But, he wasn't worthy of such a beauty. *And, for fucks sake, this siren is a witch. Could you at least remember that?* He spoke in his mind to his dick.

"If you say so. Fine. You're the big bad vampire now. My mind, it just hasn't caught up. To me you're still twenty. You still look it of course. And, you're still the boy I wanted so badly. Listen," her voice had softened as the blush on her face had grown. "I'm sorry about your maker. I don't know what will happen now to this town. War has been declared on all three sides. The clans are going to battle, and who knows what or who will get caught in the crossfire. I never

understood why we couldn't all just get along, why we had to be natural enemies. Yes, we each have powers over the other, but does that mean we have to use them against each other? Do we have to hate each other just because we are different? Or should we be joining together because we are different from the mortals, the thing we have in common. We're sitting here talking, the walls of this house haven't exploded out, and the world hasn't imploded in on itself."

Maybe not yours!

"We are talking," he agreed. "And, not exactly how I'd expected the conversation to go. I had thought I would have to glamour you to get the information I wanted. But you never gave me the chance." He looked down at his watch when a yawn took him, made his eyes water. "Shit, we have been talking for some time. I'm sorry. I can't take you back now. The sun is coming up. I can feel it. I'm not sure what to do with you now. Fuck!" His mind had gone, the day sleep made his body feel lethargic, his eyelids heavy.

He'd created a real problem for himself. He'd really intended to grab a witch, glamour her for information, and return her to her world. This witch, though, he hadn't planned on.

"It's not a problem. I mean, they already know I'm gone, I'm sure, or will soon. Anyway, got a phone?"

He pulled his cell from his pocket. The brief touch of her hand on his as she took his phone sparked a few more minutes of life into him.

"Penny, it's Winter," he heard her say into the cell phone, her name rushed over him like a cool breeze. Her pale skin was definitely of winter, but not the fiery red hair that cascaded over her white shoulders. "Listen. Yes, I know someone broke in. I tried to go after them, but of course lost them in the woods. They were too fast for my magic to stop. Anyway, I didn't feel like coming back, so I grabbed an empty cabin. I'm going to sleep. Will see you later."

She hung up the phone and handed it back to him. He shoved it in his jeans pocket as if he was afraid to touch anything she'd had in her possession.

"See there, all solved," she gloated. "Many cabins are still empty this time of year. No one will come looking for me. Trust me, I

disappear all the time and no one cares. As I said, I'm kind of an outcast among my kind these days."

Isaac just shook his head. "Thanks, I don't know what to say. You covered my ass. But, what will you do now?"

"Stay here if that's okay with you. I promise, I won't hurt you if that's what you're worried about. I won't stake you in your sleep or put a spell on you. After all of these years, I'm just too relieved to see you alive." She looked to the bed across the room. Everything was in one place, one big room like a one room studio apartment underground with the exception of the bathroom in the back. Sparing no expense, Drake had even managed some sort of plumbing system. The entire place ran off a generator in this underground suite, due to the fact there were no windows at all.

"Well, in my sleep fogged brain, I hadn't thought of getting staked or spelled, but thank you for putting the thoughts into my head. I don't fear death though. Well, dying again that is. I should have died years ago, alone with that moon on the side of the road. So go ahead and stake me if you wish."

He gave her a sly smile as he moved to the bed like the walking dead, not energetic enough to care if he was even capable of fearing this beautiful creature.

As he fell like a wooden soldier onto the mattress, she whispered, "I'm glad you didn't die. I'm thrilled that I got to talk to you tonight. It has always a dream of mine."

He turned to look at her; beauty, sheer, exquisite allure, too pure, too innocent, too golden for the likes of him. But, he appreciated the view as his eyes closed.

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CHAPTER TWO

His phone rang in his jeans pocket. The grating sound resonated pain through his entire body and up through his head, set his teeth on edge as it roused him from sleep. The feeling was reminiscent of the time he'd made a bad bite and scrapped his teeth against bone. Hey, that had been worse than nails on a chalkboard, he could attest to that fact. After he'd fumbled with the phone, a glance at the damned blaring lighted numbers on the clock beside the bed showed night had fallen.

"What?" Isaac barked into the phone.

At the same time the voice on the other end yelled at him for not calling last night. Before he could respond, a hand moved over his stomach, made him flee the bed, turn with his back to the wall, into a fangs-bared ready-to-pounce stance.

There lay Winter. Her hand grasped the sheet he'd been on. No it looked like the sheet he'd been under. *Had she covered him while he slept?* The idea of it sent his mind running in all different directions. He had to focus.

"Isaac. Isaac. Are you there?" the phone screeched.

"Yes, Achim, sorry. You woke me up. Still shaking off the day sleep. Sorry I didn't call but I got in just in time to flee the sun coming up and to go to sleep," he lied. It made him feel like a petulant, disobedient child. Still against the wall, his face held as tight as his fists, he probably looked the part too.

"We were worried about you." Achim's voice got lower and deeper. "Look, we are going out, talking to a few sources planted in the area, and then we will be over to figure out our next step. Maybe two hours. Stay inside, okay. Gives us one less thing to worry upon."

Achim, he fell so easily back into his old language, let some old terminology or ways of speaking slip, when he was upset in any way. Isaac agreed to stay in then closed the phone and looked at Winter. He

was awake enough now to realize that jittery sensation he got around her flowed through him again, made him feel – well – mortal. And, damn it all, was that happy? It was much like adrenaline flowing through your blood when you wanted something so bad you could taste it. Excitement he had no right to.

"Winter…how did you get your name? How do I not remember you?" he stammered out through the thoughts in his mind.

"Not remember me? Well, do the math. Last time we lived in the same city, you were twenty and I was sixteen. You were not about to notice me. We witches dressed Goth, basically because what choice did we have. We weren't going to fit in anyway. Everyone was better off if we were outcasts. And, my name is simply the season I was born in. Pretty lame, right?"

"Not really. It suits you."

"The vamp's calling *me* cold, good one!"

"No!" He cleared his throat, lowered his voice that had gotten the same memo as his dick apparently; get up, get excited, full power ahead. "No. What I meant was, it is…it is beautiful, pure, just like you."

"You think I'm beautiful?" She sat up, her thin nightgown slipped down off her breast a bit, give him just another half inch of skin to look at, and he got lost in the view. Really, was it her energy, the lighting in the place, or did her pale skin really glisten like snow under the sun, something he hadn't seen in well over a decade?

"Are you kidding me? I…but, we can't go there. Let me lay it out for you – no, for me. I'm a vamp and you're a witch. Our clans have declared outright war against each other. You are, for all intents and purposes, the enemy, and a mortal. Your blood is my food. The life I've lead these past ten years, I'm nothing like the boy you thought you knew. Is that enough?"

"Well, if you want to point out the negatives."

"Yeah. Guess I do. I have to for both our sakes." His feet didn't listen though. He walked closer to the bed. "Why did you risk sleeping beside me, beside a monster who could have woken up thirsty?"

"I'm not afraid of you. Maybe I should be, but I close my eyes, and I

see you as you were. My heart, it flutters like I'm a teenage girl all over again."

"Well, I'm nothing like I was, body, face, mind, soul or lack of one. So, stop it. We can't go back. Even if we did, what would it change? Open your eyes and look at me now! Really *look* at the thing I am in front of you today. I'm ugly, inside and out. I can never be again the boy you thought you knew. Maybe I wish I could be, but even he would have ravished you like he shouldn't…" he left off when she scooted over to where he now sat on the bed.

Her fingers, warm, rested close to his, her magic flowed from them and through him, intensified with each inch she dared get closer to him. He did feel like he had known her forever, a virtual stranger, made intimate by something otherworldly.

"You're not ugly." Her fingers ran over his scars – lines that ran like track marks – like he'd been clawed repeatedly but were pale like the rest of his skin.

"Then you aren't really seeing me."

"I think I am," Winter whispered. "Do you think you could ever forgive me?"

She dropped her head, and her hand came to rest on his shoulder, her fingers gripped his skin. It had been a long time since someone had held onto him, like they needed him, like he had something to offer them.

His hand covered hers and removed it from his flesh. He placed it on her thigh where her nightgown had ridden up baring half of the area, faintly freckled to match her fiery red hair.

"There is nothing to forgive. You tried to help me. Intention is unforgivable. Outcome is a whole other story."

"Thank you for looking at it that way, but—"

"But what? We have to get you out of here, back home. My family will be here soon. They can't find you, or even find out that I took you."

"I'm not ready to go yet!"

Isaac was shocked – and not much surprised him – by the sheer force of her voice, her will.

“Winter,” he sighed, his hands pulsed, ached to grab her, to hold her, to kiss her until she knew him, knew all of him intimately. Yet, her safety, the possibility of her rejection, kept his hands on his own lap where they gripped his thighs.

He bedded woman all the time – ones who didn’t care in the dark club, later in the dark of his hole in the wall apartment – what he looked like as long as he was a good fuck and had given them a warm place to sleep. He took care of the whores, if that redeemed him in any way after he’d enacted retribution, for a high price, on the streets where he worked for a bounty hunter. He never asked why, just did as told, took the money, bought sex, and tipped the poor waifs well. Yeah, he was a fuckin’ saint.

“No, don’t Winter me! I’m afraid of leaving here and missing the chance to know what it’s like to touch you, to have you touch me. I’ve dreamed of you for years. I’ve worried about you for years. Something about that night – you lying there, feeding my magic into you to save your life – it changed me forever. It made me the witch I am today, popular or not among my kind. Some part of you stayed with me. I can’t explain it. I’m scared, sure. You are a vampire, but I welcome the danger, the thrill of it. If only to find out if these feelings I’ve carried for you –for a boy I never even got the chance to know – are something I should acknowledge, or just some fantasy I’ve created in my head.”

“Stop!” he yelled when she finally paused long enough for him to get a word in edgewise. “Let’s say it’s fantasy and move on, for your sake.”

“You’ve been with mortals before, haven’t you? I mean surely, you interact with them, live among them at night. Surely in the past ten years you have been gone, you’ve had sex with a woman, one not vampire. It happens all the time here. The tourist humans don’t even know they are with a vamp in this town. No one acknowledges it, but we all know that all three clans do it. They don’t all end up dead. Why do you think you wouldn’t be able to control yourself with me? I want you, if only to fulfill a dream. One time, no strings, is all I’m asking. No man in his right mind would turn down such an offer no matter

who the woman is."

Her bluntness tongue-tied him for a minute. He swallowed, his strong – almost unbearable – desire to have her, to see her body completely bared before him, messed with his ability to think straight. Someone so beautiful, who'd seen him in the light, wanted him anyway, would be beyond anything he'd let himself dream as a vamp. To taste her would be heaven. Could he stop with just the taste of her skin? Could he drink just one sip of her blood?

"You are different," Isaac spat though he hadn't meant to sound so harsh. "Sorry. It's just this magic of yours, this connection. I don't know what would happen. I can smell your blood, sweet, calling to me. What if I bite you and can't stop? If I did something wrong, could I even glamour it away? Doesn't work on your kind or is that some myth you guys let us keep?"

"No, it doesn't. We fake it, let you guys think it does, but it doesn't. There will be nothing I would want to forget. I already know what you are. I don't need to be made to forget like the humans. You'll stop. I trust you."

"No." He stated flatly, his fingers dug into his skin now. "I won't risk you or this odd connection we have based on a moment of tragedy. I can't explain it, this piece of you my body recognizes, but for maybe the first time in my vampire life, I have the need to cherish something, rather than walk away or even destroy it. I don't want it explained to me. I just want it to be. Let it go at that. Once you're back home, I think I will like knowing I'm part of someone's fantasy. I won't taint it."

"You egotistical bastard!"

"What the hell did I say?" He threw his hands up. His first moment as part of a caring and feeling world in ten years and he'd screwed it up somehow. *No shit, dumb ass, what did you expect?*

"You cherish it, you asshole, and ignore what I want! Who died and made you boss? I don't think so!"

"I died! All right? I could kill you and that makes me boss!" He spat back at her.

"Then you obviously have no clue as to the extent of what I could

do to you?"

"In a coven maybe. Alone, I don't think you're much of a match. I feel your magic, but you're not spelling me are you? What I feel for you, it's all my own isn't it?"

"You feel something then?" Her voice rose, and she bit her lip, looked away.

"Yes. I feel something. It doesn't change the facts."

"I think it does." She glanced at him.

A few seconds later, she practically dove at him. His body braced as hers fell against his. Caught off guard she knocked him flat on his back and her body fell over his. Her hands grabbed his face hard and her mouth crushed down over his lips. Her tongue entered his mouth before he could process it all. But his body, his instincts, reacted. His fangs revealed themselves right into her lip.

Winter pulled back with a small gasp. Her hand went to her mouth. Magic swirled around him, the power that just resided inside of her increased, glowed around them both so much that he resisted tasting her. Stunned could be the only explanation of why he didn't put his tongue on his fang to get a hint of her blood's flavor. Was he feeling warm?

Yet, when her hand fell from her mouth and she licked over the scarlet colored blood that ran from her lip, he lost control of the situation. He pulled her back against him with one arm curled around her back, while his other hand went to her breast and squeezed the round globe hard. At the same time, he sucked the blood from her lip. Honey – pure sweet nectar – made him feel like he had drunk a sweet wine. It went straight to his head. The instant high was like nothing he'd ever experienced before, more pure – more brilliant and full – more clear and potent than any drug he'd ever done.

With her moan, somehow, he found the strength to pull back, lick over her lip so the puncture marks healed, and looked into her eyes rather than drank her dry. He was satiated with just a sip. He wondered if it was truly amazing or all a product of her magic, one she controlled or one natural about her? The whole reason their kinds didn't mix was the unknowns. Her lip had sealed over right before his

eyes, faster than a normal human's would. Her eyes were glassy, but not from tears. He feared it was from desire.

Next thing he knew, she pulled her nightgown off. Her breasts, pale, perfect, with hard red nipples, were an unbelievable picture. With her white lace panties her only clothing, she sat up on her knees. She couldn't have looked more seductive if she'd tried. She had curves in all of the right places in his mind.

"I will bite you again."

"I know. You stopped the first time, hardly taking any blood, and I don't mind. Like you, I don't fear death. But, neither do I fear you killing me." She flipped her hair off her neck, leaned her head to the side in invitation.

He crawled to her, using a hand to push her down onto her back. All of his reservations, fears, logical arguments, were taken away by one taste of her blood. Stupid, but who the hell cared now. He was addicted, forever – unexplainably and stupidly – a full-blown addict of this witch.

"Your neck is not where I want to bite you next." He didn't need the blood; he simply *wanted* the blood. A distinct and reassuring difference at the moment, but he was well aware of how these things could change without a moment's notice. Yet right now his focus was on wanting to give her pleasure like she'd never had before. Erotic sensations only a vampire could give. Mixed with her magic, who knew what could happen.

Crouched between her legs, he pushed her thighs apart and took in the sweet smell of her arousal. He watched her shiver when his palm glided up her leg to her thigh. He buried his face in the lace of her panties, grabbed her ass and shook himself to know where he was. She was this vision of an angel in his dark clutches, one he'd seen in flashes in his dreams for years. Maybe it had been her, the residue of her magic. *Maybe he had seen her that night?* Then he took in her scent again and figured who the hell cared on the how of it. As if to prod him along, her hips moved in his hands, her mound ground against his mouth.

A few bites and a pull discarded the thin strip of lace hiding the last

of her from him. Licking up her wet lips, her juices tasted as wonderful as her blood. She opened herself to him; let her thighs fall further apart. Rising to meet the occasion, her ass clenched in his palms until the most intimate part of her was against his face. He stuck his tongue inside her opening and she tensed, cried out. As he licked and sucked every inch of her sex, her skin turned a more brilliant color of red, more and more of her blood came close to the surface. He looked. He tasted. He smelled. He touched. And, he was drugged from the interplay of his senses.

Finding her swollen clit, his swiped at it. She thrust toward him each time his tongue met with her engorged flesh. Careful to keep it from his fangs, he sucked on it lightly, made her cry out. Only when her body began to shudder – the moment he knew she stood on the precipice of bliss – did his fingers replace his tongue on her clit, swirled her juices around the hard nub with the rough pads of his fingers. Then he moved his mouth to bite into the fleshiest part of her thigh.

One draw of blood into his mouth and her hips violently trembled. She cried out, but rather than sense her pleasure, he felt she'd cast a spell on him. Her magic poured over him, through him like blood through his veins. He felt her climax. It traveled deep into his groin, filled the area with pleasure. His cock was rock hard, waves of contractions flowed through him. Thoughts, not his, entered his head. *My goddess, Isaac Roberts, just made me come. Fuck me Isaac.*

He pulled back, stared at her. He only realized he'd left the wound marks open on her thigh when blood dripped onto his leg. He licked over the tiny holes to seal her flesh, to let it start to heal, before he turned back to confront her.

"You did that on purpose. You pushed thoughts into my head."

"Yes. Mind games. I'm a witch. I'm brilliant at them."

"But, so easily. Can you hear my thoughts?"

"If I wanted to, I could control them. You Vamps don't fear us for nothing. But, I wouldn't do that to you. I think you know that. I think you can feel enough of me, of my magic, to know I'm not a threat to you."

Isaac nodded and looked up her body. Her skin glowed in the light of the few lamps that were still on. He realized he'd slept with the light on last night with his face exposed no less. As well, he'd slept like the dead with a stranger in his bed, unprotected. However, what the realization gave to him was pure power rather than vulnerability. Usually he cared little for life, but right now he wanted to live it. Could he live with that extreme change was the question.

Like a lion over prey, he came over her. His body felt heavy as it met her softness from head to toe. He kissed her, gently, for the first time, savored the feel of her lips on his as her tongue rubbed along his fangs.

"I taste not only my own arousal, but my own blood."

"Damn, that was one sexy sentence." He smiled down at her. And, damn but he could get used to this. A connection, love at first sight, mortal enemies, he just could no longer deny or resist any of it no matter how dangerous or stupid it was.

Moving his hips, he nestled his between hers. The hard, tight, head of his cock met her warm, wet, softness.

"Am I too cold?" he whispered, as he felt her shudder again.

"No, not too cold."

When she smiled, his heart – the one that no longer beat, but lie dead in his chest – felt like it came alive for one moment. He reached for the blanket on the bed and pulled it over them, hoped to keep some of her body heat in it. He felt deliciously warm. She'd made him feel so alive, like a true man again. He couldn't control her thoughts and didn't know how to send his own to her as she'd just done to him, so he spoke instead; his fear of rejection outweighed by his pleasure.

"You make me feel so alive again, I swear my heart beat. I feel your warmth, not only in your blood running through me, but every place we touch. For so long I've hardened myself from the world, taking some physical pleasures, but denying any existence of humanity inside myself. That is until last night when I held you in my arms, carried you across town. You have saved me, ten years ago and again last night. I didn't know it until just this moment."

"You've saved me too."

“From what?”

“My solitary existence, even if for just one night if that is all this can be.”

He swept his lips over hers; their smiles coincided against each other. He entered her then, pushed his length inside her body, felt her inner walls adjust around him. She practically purred. Their initial slow rhythm became frenzied fast. Her inner walls gripped him as he moved in and out of her. Her fingers dug into his back. He felt her power swirl around them again, her voice came clear in his head.

Bite me, Isaac. It’s all right. I know you want to.

He did. His fangs pierced her neck and sent him over the edge. As her blood flowed into his mouth again, his seed – void of life, but strong – shot into her. She quivered around him, tightened and loosened, milked him of every last drop of his come as she came herself.

After healing her wounds with his tongue, he bunched the blanket more in between their chests to protect her from his chill. He moaned when he slipped from inside her. He knew the connection lost would have been worse though, if some part of her didn’t envelope him with her energy still.

“Better than I ever dreamed it could be,” she said as she looked up into his eyes. He knew they were dark, but she still didn’t look away. “I could probably heal your face now, with a spell, a few herbs. Not that I care what you look like, you’re beautiful. But, I feel guilty. Like I might have done this to you.” Tears slipped from her eyes, tiny knives into his heart, which had just now come alive.

“No. Don’t feel like that. You’ve already healed something in me that, until now, I didn’t care was even broken.”

A sound in the distance, the feeling of his family drawing near, made him move her with lightening speed into the closet, the only hiding space in the whole damn place save for the bathroom.

“There is a door behind this wall. Get in there so they don’t feel you. I’m sorry.”

He left her there and said something like a prayer to god only knew who that she would be safe, remain hidden. Although, he knew

already he would protect her to his death. *A vampire and a witch? No different than my sister with a werewolf.* This was his last thought as the main door opened and he shoved her nightgown and what was left of her panties under the sheet on the bed.

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CHAPTER THREE

"Isaac." He heard his name as Achim came to him and wrapped his arms around him in a grandfatherly hug. As soon as the man let go, Willa, his wife, stepped in to take his place. Kissing Isaac's cheek as she stood on her toes to hug him, he bent to meet her. She was short, but a feisty old vampire, made centuries ago in a German village with her husband Achim.

Isaac's sister, Amberlyn, stood back with her head bowed. He could see her fingers were wrapped tight around each other, rested – if you could call it that – over her stomach. Her grief, guilt – useless emotions for a vampire – turned the knife already lodged in his heart.

"I'm not mad at you, Amberlyn. You didn't stake him, and you never meant for this to happen. It's the difference between intention and outcome." The words lingered in his mind, very much just as appropriate here as they were in his own situation with Winter.

Amberlyn sighed, looked up at him, as if to see if he had told the truth. He motioned her toward him and noticed with a lump in his chest that Willa patted Amberlyn's shoulder once as she made her way across the room. Achim had turned away from her though.

Holding his sister to him – a woman he really knew very little – he was pretty sure he shocked them both when he whispered into her hair, "I love you, as did our father. He would want your happiness above anything else."

Achim cleared his throat. "We are going after the werewolf who meant to shoot Amberlyn, but got Drake instead. His gun was filled with stake-like bullets. He had to have been just carrying the thing, as no one knew what Amberlyn had planned. So, we need to find out why. My fangs are set for him as well. But first, some matters to attend to. After revenge there must come peace in the Willows again. Every clan, vamp and werewolf and witch, understands the need for justice – an eye for an eye. But also, we need to settle back into the

way things were again, or none of us will be able to stay in the Willows. Werewolves and witches will want this more than us. Some of them their families have lived here for centuries. So, first, who will replace Drake as the head of this clan? The Vamps in this area are concerned about the trouble, of course, and want a clear ruler. Amberlyn was being groomed to rule but obviously that's not wise now. You have been away Isaac, never really a part of this clan as far as proximity goes."

"So you are saying you are the best bet then, Achim?" Isaac asked. He didn't fight him, just clarified what the man – for whatever reason – had not come out and said.

"In the eyes of the clan, probably. I had not thought I would take over again after creating Drake for the job, but it seems necessary now. I don't want it, but what choice do I have. However, behind closed doors I don't see why we can't rule together until the clan moves again to a location where you can be with us. One where your human family is not."

"Fine, but I want Amberlyn in on this too. Her actions may have caused what happened, but she is the one Drake groomed for the job. I think he would want it. We could use her input."

"It is being rumored the witches plan to retaliate for the witch they lost as well," Achim went on, ignored what Isaac had said about Amberlyn. "There was no meeting with them, or reasoning with them. All communication has pretty much shut down between the werewolves and the vampires as well. The few of them who met with Drake only when necessary, won't talk to me now. Anyway, the witches want someone, anyone, held accountable for the crime committed. Even if it was just crossfire, a second shot that hit the witch. We have said we were hunting for the werewolves ourselves, but I'm not sure they will stop at that. They are threatening werewolf and vamp alike with spells, necromancy, whatever magical nonsense they can cook up. We could just move on, end our time here early, but the clan hates having to move every twenty to thirty years. We have only been here twelve. If we can see this end peacefully, the majority of the clan wants to stay if we can."

“We will work to get them what they want. Not being able to publicly fight though, it fuckin’ sucks!” Isaac tried to contain the anger that had suddenly risen in him – fierce, untamed – like last night before Winter. Yet, just her name, the thought of her naked in that closet, helped to calm him some. He wasn’t sure of the source of his anger this time, and that was never a good thing.

“There is more bad news,” Amberlyn spoke up. “They are saying a witch disappeared last night, was taken by a vamp due to the way she just disappeared. A loud noise, a brief sound, like the start of a scream, then no trace of her seconds later, door broken. But, we think it’s an excuse for them to attack hard. She was a wayward witch anyway, not a close part of the family. She kept to herself, had a history of disappearing anyway. No one was concerned before this about the bitch. It could all just be a set up to frame us, cause more of an uproar than I already have.”

Isaac bit his tongue not to defend Winter’s honor, or at least his witch’s actions. Yet, he remained stoic, as if he just took it all in. When Achim’s phone rang, he took a moment to turn toward the closet, hopeful she hadn’t heard the hurtful words they’d said. He let the emotions for her rage through him briefly, go through the muscles in his face.

“No.” There was a pause as Achim listened to whoever was on the phone, and Isaac knew it was bad. “We’ll be right there,” Achim said into the phone. Then he spoke to the room, “The war in the Willows has officially gone into its second battle.”

Amberlyn got right in front of Achim. She wanted news, but he seemed to look past her to Isaac.

“What happened?” Willa finally asked, as she put her arm protectively around Amberlyn.

“We have to go, Willa. The witches are playing tricks at the water. Tourists are there, and they’re somehow possessing a vampire and a werewolf, making them do stupid things. The humans cannot get caught up in this. Isaac, you can’t go down. It’s too risky. Too many people are around. Someone will see you and will think you are back from the dead.”

No hint of a smile crossed his mouth with those words. It was no joke, and Isaac knew it. He could not, and would not, hurt his birth family by being seen now.

"What about me?" Amberlyn asked.

"No!" Achim's voice echoed off the walls of the room. "It has already been tediously agreed that you and Kane are to go no where, to not be part of this war starting, and to stay apart. You will be killed on sight. If you are to be kept alive…" The man's steady voice broke. "Willa, come now. Amberlyn, go home."

Achim nodded to Isaac before he left in a rush. Willa gave him a glance as well before she disappeared too.

Amberlyn sighed, "Sorry." Then she was gone as well.

The thought of being trapped here didn't sit well with his nature. He stormed to the closet and looked at his beautiful mistake.

"They think you were taken. It has already started down at the cove, some trouble the witches have brewed up. They are playing with a vamp and a werewolf right out in front of humans. I have to go."

"You can't. I heard them. You risk being seen. I could go. Show up, stop at least one bit of trouble."

"No, you're not going out and getting yourself hurt while I stay here. Shit, why does everything have to be so fucked up?"

"It will work itself out. It always does in the end." She touched him, but he pulled away. "What? I can't touch you now. You've already come to your senses?"

"It was wrong of me to let what happened between us…well, happen. Your damned magic or not, I should've had more control. My clan is at war with yours, and I was here literally sleeping with the enemy."

"I don't want to be your enemy."

"Let it go, Winter. We have to be. I'm leaving," Isaac said as he turned from her. He knew it was the only way he could walk away. His draw to this woman was insane, but so incredibly strong. He didn't understand it. In fact one could say he feared it, it was just that consuming.

"Then, I'm coming with you," she said.

He heard her follow him across the room. “No!” He said as he turned. Her body hit smack against his. Stifling the urge to kiss her, to grab her ass and pull her against him, he did just the opposite of everything he wanted. Because at the moment, it was all that made sense.

“Don’t make me use my damned magic,” she spat. He didn’t take her threat lightly at the moment.

Besides, if he left he couldn’t leave her here to wonder out of the cave. He didn’t trust her enough with its whereabouts yet. Lust and trust, the words sounded the same, but were worlds apart. One had nothing to do with the other. He was inclined to trust her, but again, he couldn’t take any chances, couldn’t follow his gut feelings with the woman. His dead heart seemed to lead him astray.

His only option was to tie her up, but he would have to use his speed and his strength to pull that off. Catch her off guard before she could spell him. *Shit. Things are so messed up.* So she’d said a vamp couldn’t glamour a witch. Their power over the mind was better than a vamp’s. If he was to believe her, then that left a vampire’s only real defense against a witch to be a quick bite, one that killed them. It didn’t work for him in this situation. He couldn’t rip out her neck, not when he wanted it in so many other ways.

It was a split second decision. He had to get down to the cove.

“Grab something to wear out of that closet. I think Amberlyn keeps a few things in there. You’re coming with me. I plan on hiding out in the edge of the tree line at the corner of the cove, alongside the barn for the kayaks and stuff. I need to at least see what’s going on. If Achim thinks I am going to just sit here and wait for news, he doesn’t know me at all!”

She hurried, did as she’d been told, and he felt something close to guilt for the way he’d treated her. But he had no idea what else to do with her, how to handle her after all he’d done. *Stupid, stupid! Idiot in life and in death!*

Even berating himself, he couldn’t help but watch as she slipped a sundress over her head right there in front of him. Just the short glimpse at her skin, her shape, her nipple, the juncture of her thighs

and the images of her body were burned into his brain.

He grabbed her, at least this time told her to hold on tight, then he raced them to the spot he had chosen to hide at the cove.

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CHAPTER FOUR

With his speed and agility to make quick leaps onto some buildings, he landed them on the roof of the barn, which now was used as a sort of recreational boathouse. He squatted down with her still in his arms under the leaves of a tree on the corner.

Vampires, witches and werewolves all milled about doing their usual jobs, not interacting, while others of each clan lurked around in the shadows. His keen sight made them all easier to spot. He found Achim first. Thankfully he was one of the ones out in the open. The old man just mingled in the thick of the night activity to make sure nothing bad went down. Isaac made sure to stay out of his range of notice. Achim would sense him before he saw them.

Scanning the place, he saw a cousin of his he'd not seen since right before he'd died. In fact he'd hung out with the guy about an hour before his accident. Now it had been ten years since they'd spoken a word to each other. The reality that for all intents and purposes he was dead to his birth family, hit him like a kayak paddle to the head. Something in him reacted, wanted to reach out, to speak to his cousin, to his mother and father too. To see them would be amazing, but. he wanted to warn them too, to be able to go and save his family from possible danger if an all out war did erupt here. But, he was pretty much damned if he did and damned if he didn't in this situation. *Fuck!*

Winter put her hand on his arm from where she crouched under him. That she could sense his feelings unnerved him further if that was even possible. He had Winter's whole body protected with his. This hadn't escaped him either, how natural it was to protect her, how nicely she fit into the curve of his body, like he was meant to shelter her.

Her touch brought out his own humanity and nearly broke him. He wanted to get her out of there. He wanted to be with her again, to feel her body, naked, move against his. It had been only one day, and he

already didn't know how to let her go. Their time together already clearly seemed a mistake, a mistake of grave magnitude which only promised trouble to come. *Just chalk it up to another of my idiotic and impulsive decisions*.

He heard Winter suck in a breath just before a vamp on the beach started being loud and obnoxious. The guy acted drunk, but by Winter's reaction he wondered if it was just magic, if he had been spelled to do the things he'd done. The vamp patted a werewolf on the back, who turned and for a second, showed a brief glimpse of canines, before he got his bearings, and pulled back. He marveled at the werewolf's strength with the full moon only days away.

So far, the humans had taken no notice of a drunk local. The guy wore a uniform, appeared to be on the job, but losing his job was the least of the guy's worries now.

"Is he spelled?" Isaac whispered in her ear.

"Yes. They're over at the marina, inside one of the boats. I can't stop them from this distance."

"You can't get involved anyway," he whispered back, his hands gripped tighter around her upper arms.

"Then why am I here? Why are you here? I mean why are you really here? You could be seen. So many here would recognize you. You know that."

"I know. I just couldn't stay back in that room, not knowing what was going on. I have two families in this town, the one who gave birth to me, and the one who changed me. I don't want either of them to get hurt. How could I just sit and wait for news?"

"You said that before. And?" she whispered back, not an ounce of frustration in her voice. He marveled at the creature beneath him. He even got on his own nerves, how could he not get on hers?

"And...what?"

"Come on. Tell me," she sighed. "We both know that you can't help either set of them if something happens."

"I wanted to see them, okay? I wanted to see if I could get a glimpse of my mom and dad and brother. I need to see for myself that they are okay after all of these years, truthfully. I got reports through

Drake of what they are up to, but I needed to know that everyone I care about is safe, see it with my own eyes, detection be damned."

"You can't do that to your clan or to your birth family. They went through hell losing you, especially without the finality of a body."

"I know already! I'm stupid. Maybe you should just go. Go out there and show your clan, your family, that you are safe then get away from here. You would be better off away from me."

"Would I?" She placed a light kiss on his cheek, then suddenly he felt her stiffen. A chill ran down his back, making even him shake.

The supposedly drunk vampire on the beach had picked a fight with the werewolf now for sure. So this was the witch's plan, to put the two clans, vamp and werewolf, at war first. As if they already weren't, but to make them come out in public, come to physical blows. *Surely, the two Clan leaders will see through this?* The humans wouldn't know the difference. All they would see was that two local kids had fought, but each clan risked exposure if pushed to their limits, if fangs or canines came out. Defensive instincts could be a bitch to stifle in the heat of public confrontation.

There was pushing and shouting, humans came into the mix to try to stop it or just watch. Isaac held onto the tree, tried not to move, not to stop one of his clan from showing his fangs. Who the hell knew what the witches would make the poor guy do next. They could make the kid's fangs descend. They could control them both. Known to have necromancy spells over vampires and other spells to control animals, they even had a spell to force a shift. This kind of exposure could eventually risk the witches being exposed too if things went too far.

If one paranormal clan came into the light, it would probably not be long before they all did. *Would they really go that far? Probably not.* He was sure this was a message to the clans, not the humans. They probably just wanted to play enough to ensure the other clans got the message, loud and clear, of what they were capable of. Fear of what could happen was often a better revenge than dealing with something actually happening.

"I have to wonder what the witches could really want out of this?" he whispered into her ear, aware of how good it felt to have a partner

in crime up here, someone to confide in. “I mean, is this just some fun revenge on their part to make the other clans sweat and squirm while proving how their magick is oh-so-fucking-powerful? Or is this a serious, eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth, straight out revenge tactic, with the death of one of each clan the only goal? They are quite aware, I’m sure, that all the vampires and werewolves can do to them is simply kill them, drain them or tear them apart like a puppy’s play toy. And they know that can’t be done out in the open.” Up until now, as they’d pretty much ignored each other, no matter where he was – Tennessee or California – he’d never realized the advantages the witches had over his kind and the werewolves.

“I truly don’t know. I put nothing past them,” Winter whispered back.

The circle around the two boys had gotten bigger as their words and threats became more intense. *Where is Achim anyway to get this young vamp – obviously turned in the last few years, as I don’t know him at all – out of harm’s way?* Of course they would play with the new, rather than chance the old. He saw Achim then, and gave a sigh of relief. *This should all end soon.* But, just as a touch of relief softened his stance, his brother got out of a boat and ran to where the first punch had been thrown.

“Goddamned do-gooder his whole life!” Isaac hissed, stood up from his crouch. Achim’s head snapped his way. The next thing he knew, Winter had placed her hand on his chest, and they were back in Drake’s home underground.

When it hit him where they were, Isaac roared at her. “What the fuck? What about my brother?” He lunged at her, grabbed her by the arms, tried to control his urge to shake her in his frustration until her neck snapped.

“You’re hurting me,” Winter cried.

He let go of her arms and stepped back away from her. He had to get control. His power and rage took out a lamp while he attempted it. The glass bulb shattered when it hit the wall at a lethal speed. Mangled metal and paper shade hit the floor, and tiny shards of glass fell like rain down around them.

Isaac saw Winter circle her hand, say a few lines, “Basiliske Galeōte meta Kōktō Podōn kai Kakoin Ommatoin to Phōs Emēi Cheiri Kathias tōi Kakōi Dergmati Toxeusatō!

He couldn’t follow the Latin, although the way her voice sung each word, slurred them together, he felt as if he’d gone into a trance. His limbs started to tingle as if they’d fallen asleep. He rushed at her, but he couldn’t get to his normal vampire speed. She stepped aside as she continued to speak her spell.

“Kakon Omma Petrōseōs…” she practically sang as his body fell lifeless to the bed behind her. She moved to his side. Her hands on him next felt warm, but his response to her touch, wanting to touch back, even just lay a hand over hers, was stifled by whatever spell she’d cast upon him. Inside his body, his muscles and his nerve endings attempted to work, but only succeeded in creating an internal panic, one like being drugged. Nothing on him physically moved even though he wanted it to.

She rolled him over to his back since he’d landed face down. Then she straddled him. Her dress rose up, showed him a generous amount of her creamy thighs. Inside his head he screamed. He bucked, wanted to feel his erection – well he thought he had one anyway – against her warmth, yet nothing happened. He heard not a sound.

His phone rang.

“I’m going to get your phone for you and allow you to speak. I warn you though, against telling whoever is calling about your current predicament. You needed to chill out. I helped.” She shrugged and then reached into his jeans pocket, so close to his dick, for his phone. “It’s Achim.”

He could only watch as with one hand moving she chanted a few more phrases in Latin, then with the other she flipped open the phone. When she placed the infernal device to his ear, he could hear Achim shout.

“…I mean what the hell were you trying to prove there boy? You directly disobeyed me! Were you going to save your brother? Then how would you explain the fact that ten years later you were alive and hadn’t contacted them?”

“Is my brother okay?” Isaac spat into the phone. He’d never spoken to Achim this way before. He had always treated him with respect, like one would a grandfather despite his youthful appearance, but these past few days wore on him. He still hadn’t even had the time to come to terms with the loss of his maker or this witch who currently controlled and straddled him.

“He’s fine. Thankfully he didn’t see you. The fight was stopped. We were circling. We had it handled, but wanted to go to the source. Once we found the witches who were casting the spells, a vamp and a werewolf, begrudgingly but together for good show against the witches, went to make sure the witches were well aware they’d been caught. Finally, everyone went home for the night. The Vamps were pretty upset though. Retaliation will surely be heavy on their minds still.”

Isaac had always loved to hear Achim talk. The old-world language accompanied by his still slightly German accent, had brought him comfort many times. He needed it now, and with the news of everything being over for the night, he took it like a greedy child being handed candy to pacify him.

“Again, Isaac,” Achim went on. “Now that you are back, we need to talk about this family thing. I need to know where you are with this. If you would contact them, even making up some outrageous story about why you are alive now, ten years later, how would you ever explain why you couldn’t see them when the sun is out? You know only one side of your face is scarred, from the other side anyone who knew you would know who you are instantly.”

“I know. I’ve been through all that a hundred times in my mind.” Isaac sighed heavily. The fact he could do so – could sigh, could move his mouth, yet the rest of his body lay paralyzed – suddenly shocked him. Somehow this sexy witch, still on top of him – in fact leaning over so her breasts were pretty much one hundred percent revealed to him – had spelled him so that he couldn’t move a muscle. She’d petrified him. That was a word of the Latin she’d used that he’d understood. Yet she still allowed him to use his lungs, useless on any other account, to speak. Even working against him, she fascinated

him, well more than she'd already had before.

"We will talk soon," Achim said, sounded tired. "There are only a few more hours till day sleep is upon us and I have some things to do. But, we need to meet come sundown tomorrow. Some of the clan are hammering me for a definitive leader. We need to decide now that Drake..." Achim left off with a break in his voice.

"We will. Tomorrow. And Achim, sorry to add to your shit-load of problems tonight."

"Not a problem, son. At least we are all safe to see another night. See you tomorrow."

Winter clicked the phone closed and leaned over to lay it on the nightstand. Isaac practically growled as this put her sex flush over his cock.

"How can I feel my dick if I can't move the damn thing?"

"The beauty of this spell is to paralyze only the bones, petrify actually, for a time, but still allow the subject to live. Your erection is all muscle, and thus free to work of it's own volition, off instinct, off what you want, desire. If you were human, your heart would still beat and your lungs would still breathe. It really just petrifies the bones, making the joints not work. This is why your muscles still feel like they can move, but actually don't. And, why you can still get hard."

She did a little lap dance over his erection. It drove him mad to want her so badly, and not even have the choice to deny himself, yet still feel everything, every god-damned blessed inch where her body met with his.

"I'm relaxed now. Well, calm anyway. You can undo the spell." The muscles in his face twitched.

"No, I think before the sun comes up, I might like having you at my mercy."

"You would, would you?" The twitch over his eye freaked him out, felt more like a muscle spasm. "Yeah, you damnable witch, I just winked at you, but it could not have been pretty."

"You're always cute to me."

"*Sure*. I do actually see my reflection in mirrors. That is a stupid rumor. So I know what you see."

Usually instinct would have him hide the scared side of his face as much as he could from whomever he was with, but now he couldn't. She'd taken away his right to hide his scars and called him cute. Nothing about her made sense, and most things about her just scared the un-living version of daylights out of him.

"Well, I don't care what your opinion is," she smiled at him, a wicked grin that made his stomach tighten. "I know what I see. And, man, you are one drop-dead gorgeous vamp. The scars are only a small part of you. There is so much more. I think, in fact, while I have you in almost total submission, and Achim said it was still a few hours before day sleep, that I will show you just how much I do think of you… how much I want you." She squared her shoulders but then tilted her head to the side. Logic and integrity and all that crap be damned, he wanted to bite her right where that beautiful vein in her neck throbbed with her blood.

"Hmmm," she continued. "Is this considered wrong, to take advantage of a man I've spelled into paralysis?"

"You mean will I scream rape? I don't think so. But, really, is this what you want? I mean, what's happening between us would best be left ignored. You know, like a black cat crossing your path on Halloween night, or something along those lines."

"Cute attempt at a 'witchy' joke. But, I don't want to ignore it. What's that old song say, the one my grandmother used to play, ah yeah, something like, I know your plans they don't include me. But, hmm, how does that go…oh, yeah, but here we are, both of us… something…" she stopped to giggle. "We've got tonight babe, why don't I stay? Okay, so I think I may have screwed up a few words, but you get the point."

"What I get is that we're playing with fire here especially with all that's going down."

"Correction, I'm playing with fire. You can't play with anything."

"And you like it this way?" He smiled despite himself, despite his intentions to stay serious and pissed off – well pretend to be anyway – about what was happening here.

"I think I do like it this way. But first, your permission is requested,

oh dominated night walker, to remove your clothing." Isaac, if he had a heart that still beat, knew it would have thumped in his chest the way this woman looked at him.

"I say no, then."

"And I don't care then, I guess," her voice had been nearly as low and breathless as his.

To his complete and utter disbelief, though he'd kept up with her new game, she ripped his shirt down the middle and then across each arm until it lay in shreds beneath him. Winter went at the poor material like an animal, more a werewolf than a witch. Her body bumped his in various places, turned him on, and he remained helpless to do a thing about it.

"Damn, sexy as hell, witch. What am I going to do with you?"

"Nothing that I don't already want you to I'm sure."

She worked his jeans off him then. Torturously slow, his button was undone; his zipper unzipped, the material tugged down over his hips, and then leg by leg, pulled down over his thighs, calves and feet. He could see now that she tried to keep him off-step, not let him anticipate what would come next. His cock tented his boxers.

So he shouldn't have been shocked at all when she changed modes again – went back to fierce – ripped his boxers off him. Not as in pulling them down, but grasped and pulled up, let the material shred over the strong muscles of his ass and hips. The feeling of it – hot slices of friction against his skin like rope burns accompanied by the slivers of material brushing over his cock– made his fangs pop out as he growled at her, low and feral.

Her eyes widened, huge orbs which betrayed small amounts of real, actual fear, and he found pride in himself for intimidating her even in his condition. So sue him, it was a vamp thing, a guy thing even. She grasped his jaw hard with her hand, plopped back down, straddled his stomach. Blessed witch didn't have any underwear on either, and he could feel her wet heat. With a finger of her free hand, she stroked down over his fangs, first over one then the other. The move was so erotic, so over the top intimate, while brash and forceful at the same time. He thought, if it were possible, he'd just fallen in love with the

woman.

"You like it rough, don't you?"

"As rough as you can handle, babe," he answered as he purposely moved his mouth just enough to scratch his fang along her finger.

She shuddered, which made her magic feel like a warm energy field around him. The intense waves of activity trembled along his skin like warm balls of cotton, but under his skin it felt like a flame kindled, waited for a burst of air to back draft into an inferno.

She bent over; again her breasts almost fell out of her dress. Her face not an inch from his, she licked his fangs, ran her tongue along them, rolled it around the back of each elongated tooth, one after the other. In any other state rather than spelled, this could have been asking to die. He wanted a taste of her blood so badly it was all he could focus on aside from the luxurious – no outright fucking erotic – sensation of her warm, soft tongue over his cold, hard fangs.

When she lifted her head enough to look into his eyes, whether for approval or for feedback, whatever, he said with his voice so low it was barely audible, "I want your neck. I want your blood. If I wasn't spelled, licking a vamp's fang is one stupid ass mistake my dear."

"My dear, huh? I like that. But, if you are warning me against the dangers you pose to my life, I am all too well aware. I've been told as much my whole life, warned against your kind, men just like you. And having followed the rules for so damn long, I think I like not only breaking them, but stomping on them as well, grinding them to dust underneath my heel. I already know I like you. So let's take a walk on the wild side here vamp boy. You can't hurt me like this."

"No, I guess not. But what are you saying then, that you can hurt me?"

She shrugged.

Lifting herself from her position on his belly, she stood over him, one foot on each side of his rib cage. In an awkward – because of where she was, but damned sexy anyway – striptease, she moved her body like a snake as she removed her dress. Again with the no underwear thing, one shot and she was naked. He'd known that earlier too when they'd gone out, but then his mind had become pre-occupied

with war and retaliation. Now his only focus was on her glistening pussy, her folds open so he could see the scarlet skin of her core as she stood over him. When she lowered herself to his mouth his body trembled, muscles shook over dead bones.

When she was so close he could smell her excitement, he warned, "Don't do this. I want blood."

"Then take blood. Taste me. Bite me. I'm not afraid of you. I'll prove to you that I have more confidence in your powers to take from me, and to be able to restrain your urges at the same time, than you do. Now lick me. Stick your tongue between those fangs and lick me."

Thunder rumbled low in his chest as she laid her sex over his mouth. His lungs ached – hell, his dick throbbed to the point of pain – but he obeyed the order. He ran his tongue only over her wet folds, tasted her exotic mix of sweet and spicy and she trembled, shivered and slowly circled her hips over his face. He thrust his tongue up and down because it was all he could move. He was at her mercy even in pleasing her. Yet, she moved for them both. With the down-stroke of her hips he licked her, but as she swung them back up his fangs grazed along her swollen pussy lips. Her moans spurred him on to angle his head as to avoid his teeth poking her, but he couldn't move his neck. Only his jaw was free, and he'd already done all he could to try to prevent penetrating her with his fangs in such an intimate place. It was a perilous situation, the bloodlust nearly took his life from him, shook him to his core. What he did finally do was close his mouth, protect her flesh from his fangs.

"I knew you wouldn't bite me," she purred.

He just moved his tongue, let it shoot out from between his closed lips to her clit, lapped at it until she started to cry out his name. The sound lulled him into another realm; one where he could believe a woman such as her could want a man like him.

"Now, vampire…" she panted, "my lover, bite me." She moved up and to the side, brought her thigh down onto his mouth, pushed against his fangs. He still couldn't move his neck, but he desperately wanted her blood. He only needed to feed once every few days, but it had been that long and then some since he'd had an actual meal, more

than just sips of her.

She moved her hand between her folds and started to rub at her clit. “Bite me,” she said as she practically speared her thigh on his fangs.

He had no more restraint left in him. He felt like the veins in his head, in his dick, would burst with want of her blood. He let go and allowed his fangs to pierce the creamy white skin of her thigh, to sink deep into her flesh. With each draw he took of her honey-like blood, her fingers rubbed harder and faster on her clit. She cried out finally, a piercing but wonderful sound, as her body shook. He longed to touch her where he could see her juices coat her skin, but he couldn’t and it was the way she wanted it. For her, for this moment, she could have the control.

Tomorrow night when he woke up he would remind himself of what a bad idea this was, a vampire and a witch. His sister had done the same thing. Now here he was. His actions did not help his clan’s cause. People’s lives could be at stake. Tomorrow he would come to his senses. Tonight, well he couldn’t do much about it anyway, but he could at least let the lady have her way with him. That was the way of his life the past ten years: live in the moment, deal with the guilt later and above all please the ladies. But Winter, she was not just any lady. She was a woman – a dangerous one. With her, he could lose whatever was left of his dead heart that was still capable of love.

This little conversation in his mind gave him the willpower to stop drinking from her. He licked over the wound, initiated the healing process as her body’s shudders began to subside. She fell back on his body, her legs wide open gave him a picture perfect view of her pussy, all ripe and still wet.

“I’m thinking maybe you like it rough too,” Isaac spoke. He couldn’t just lay there helpless with this view in front of him for much longer. “Come on, babe, you’re killing me here.”

“I’m sorry. Don’t like what you see?”

“Are you kidding me? Hell no! I’m dying to have what I see, again and again, but I have no control over my body here, remember? You won. I bit you. Now what? What do you have planned next for me?”

“Mmmm, now wouldn’t you like to know? No worries though, my love.”

“Your what?” He cut her off.

“Sorry, it was what I called you in my fantasies, the ones I’m not afraid to admit that I had now. After the accident we were together, you, a vampire, and me, a witch. Because that was what I had hoped would have happened. That Drake had saved you…Anyway, in my daydreams, I would’ve you tied to a bed at my mercy, and have had your body incapable of stopping any whim I had. But in those fantasies, I fell in love with you.”

“They were fantasies with a guy you created with my face, well my old face, not who I am now.”

“I know that,” she spat. “Now shut up and stop screwing with my living out a fantasy here. I’m taking it. For once in my life, I’m in control, and I’m taking what I want!”

He said nothing as she rolled him over, face down onto the bed. He couldn’t move his neck, but she knew he had no real need for air other than to speak. Now, he couldn’t even do that. She climbed on him, and he could feel her weeping sex on his back. She started at his neck, kissed, nipped at his flesh as she ran her hands through his hair. Moving onto his back, she grabbed at his flesh, kneaded his tense muscles with her fingers as she kissed him again and again, moved down over him until she reached his ass.

His groan was heard despite his mouth being buried in the comforter. Wanting her so bad, his erection pushed against his own stomach, as hard as he could possibly be. It infuriated him to have her control him, but still it was the best kind of torture. He was always the one in control, the one who scared everyone else into submission. To have the roles reversed he found, much to his own surprise, was a great big turn on.

She bit the cheeks of his ass, rimmed over his hole, touched her fingers lightly against the small part of his balls, which were still exposed to her. He started to scream into the comforter, each time the noise was met only with a giggle from her.

She turned him back over, touched his hard cock, and he swore his

body jumped, but nothing moved.

“I want you,” he growled.

“It’s about time,” she huffed. “I’m going to release you now, consequences be damned.”

He was about to protest, but she moved her hand. With a few unintelligible words, his body shot up, pulled hers against his, followed his wayward thoughts, finally.

Without thought, on impulse only, he rolled over her, pulled her beneath him. Moving between her legs, he positioned his cock at her opening, then slowly pushed his erection into her warmth. Her back arched, her hips thrust upward and took him in all the way. She screamed, and continued to do so over and over again in tiny rants of pleasure as he moved in and out of her. He bit into her neck, drew her blood into his body and soon felt her orgasm build around him. It was all he needed to unleash all the pent up sexual energy inside him. Together they rode the high of their orgasms.

The last thing he remembered before day sleep took him was being still connected to her, their bodies as one, as a few drops of her blood ran over his bottom lip.

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CHAPTER FIVE

He was woken by the sound of the door opening followed by someone who'd yelled his name.

His eyes opened to find Achim, Willa and Amberlyn all at the foot of his bed. Coming out of sleep, he couldn't quite follow their ranting, but their faces all looked toward the bed beside him, which roused him enough to realize Winter was right there.

She too had ascended from slumber abruptly and clung to him as she shook. That was all he could take.

"Shut the hell up! You're scaring her!" He pulled her into his arms and wrapped the blanket securely around her. Who knows what position they'd been in when his clan had first walked in. Of course they would just let themselves in, they wouldn't expect him to be with anyone, and he should have already been awake by now. But his body seemed to be a little out of sorts with all the magic that had gone on around it these days.

Everyone stood, just stared at him, but he looked to Winter, "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Startled, but fine. Will they…" she asked as her body shook itself into a violent tremor.

"No, absolutely not. They would have to kill me to hurt you. Understand?" he said to Winter. Then he turned back to his family. "Understand?" He stated forcefully, a command, not a question.

"You took her then?" It was Amberlyn who'd spoken, anger laced her otherwise controlled tone.

"I meant to just take a witch, find out their intentions, then return her. I hadn't counted on having a history with the witch I took. I recognized her magic somehow, or my body did. She was there the night Drake turned me. She tried to save me from whatever spell the other witches had tried to make sure I just died. We got to talking…" he shrugged.

“Looks like you got to a lot more than talking you hypocrite!” Amberlyn bellowed.

“I never said a word to you about your choice of partners if you remember correctly, so don’t put that on me. I may not have understood coming back, but I didn’t blame you. I understand now though.”

“Isaac, I don’t understand! We are at war with her people!” Achim’s voice shook, obviously trying to feign some sort of decorum. He wondered how the man had reacted to Amberlyn’s news before the war between the clans had started.

“Yes, and I’m sleeping with the enemy. Been through this with myself thanks. Thing is, this isn’t our war. We didn’t start it. We didn’t ask for it. Amberlyn and Kane didn’t even ask for it. I know we have a responsibility to the clan to protect them now that it’s started, but… but…”

“But what, Isaac?” Achim spat. “If you antagonize the other side, you are not helping the cause, are you?”

“What if I don’t agree with the war? Does one just sit down and accept the status quo?”

“I don’t have an answer to that, but I do know that I don’t want to lose another son, another loved one. You or Amberlyn…”

“I know, but what if I love a witch?”

“You just met her!” Achim yelled.

“There is no accounting for what the heart wants, Achim. Love at first sight? Do you recall the first time we met?” Willa said, her voice solid but soft. He’d never heard her angry that he could recall.

“We were human. We fit in. We didn’t have to protect an identity, protect others. Our love didn’t jeopardize others. He has an obligation, as does his sister whose carelessness caused all of this. I’m too old to lead this clan through another war. Yet, I have to step up and lead this clan again.”

“We could just leave, Achim,” Isaac said. “I could go back to California if Winter would go with me.”

“I could leave too, with Kane,” Amberlyn added, her back straightened for the first time since he’d been back.

“And we lose everyone Achim!” Willa’s voice had risen now. “I may just go to. You stay here and lead this clan, who really just leads you. It’s time these clans stopped hating each other, isn’t it?”

“Oh sure, Willa! I will just let many lives be lost in fighting against something that has just been the way of things since the dawning of time!” Achim said, the weariness in his voice evident. Isaac felt sorry for the man. All of those hundreds of years the man had fought these absurd battles obviously wore on him.

“Thank the gods you were not in any leadership role during the civil war, or America would still have slaves,” Willa spat.

“I’ve lost too much. I’m tired, Willa. What do you want from me?”

“I want you to be a man. I want you to be the man I know you to be. Maybe it was never our fight before to try to bring witches, werewolves and vampires together, but now our children have both fallen in love with others. Now it is our fight!”

“Is it? I just don’t know.”

“Well, I do! It’s my fight. I know this week that I’ve lost my father, lived with my guilt, your guilt, and your silence,” Amberlyn finally got into the conversation, shouted at Achim. “I’ve been treated like an outsider and outcast, might as well have a giant assed scarlet letter on my chest because apparently I could screw any vamp I wanted, but I am a damned whore for falling in love with a werewolf. So, you know what, I can leave just like Isaac got to.”

“Got to? Do you know what it is like to go out into the world alone? There is something to be said for having a clan behind you, to support you. You are not going to get anything from the humans, and the vampires who live outside of clans are basically blood-sucking monsters who kill for kicks. Have fun out there.” Isaac didn’t know why he was so pissed all of the sudden at any of them. But he was pissed at all of them for having broken into his place – well Drake’s, but his now – and interrupted whatever had been about to happen when he woke up with Winter in his bed, in his arms. And they had the nerve to discuss an age-old problem, here, now. Sure this whole situation breathed down his neck, his obligations, but it was hard to get in on the solution when he couldn’t really do anything but hide.

What good am I here?

He'd really only wanted revenge at first, but even that had worn off fast now that he had been with Winter. It was one stupid werewolf who had killed Drake. At the least, his own clan would discipline him for having put the rest of the clan in danger with his actions.

Now, Isaac wanted to see a family he couldn't, wanted a woman he wasn't supposed to and had obligations he didn't feel responsible enough to care about. They were Amberlyn's obligations, now Achim's, and he was fine with that. Poor Winter no longer shook, but she still held on to him with a death grip.

Amberlyn had been standing there for a while. She had said nothing while he'd ranted to himself, but finally she broke the silence. Her words now had backbone to them as if he'd given her all the time she'd needed to make up her mind.

"You know, maybe I will have fun out there. I have done nothing but sit back and think about what it's like out there all week. Maybe with Kane I could build a new life."

"You have responsibilities here," Achim said to Amberlyn but had not looked at her.

"Yes, responsibilities that you won't let me handle, so why should I be here? You think you're going to smooth things all out so I can come back into power just because you don't want it, for whatever reason? Screw you. I'm gone."

With that, she was. And no one in the room went after her. Achim took off, but Isaac knew it wasn't to go after his sister. He was just mad, and fled to do whatever he usually did when his anger overtook him.

Willa stood still at the foot of the bed. "Are you happy, Isaac?"

He looked at Winter, then back at Willa. "Yes, I think I could be, for the first time in a decade. Something has tied us together all these years, and I know I want to explore it. If I'm going to be a hindrance here, I can leave again. I can't stay long anyway and risk exposure."

"I know. I'm sorry for, well, for everything. You two have my blessing. I love you Isaac and do think of you like a grandson. Safe journey if you go, but I think Achim could use you here, for a bit

anyway, for support once he settles down."

"For now, we'll stay right here."

"Thank you." With that he was left just with Winter. Naked Winter who warm, still held onto his arm, her body curled up tightly against him.

He turned her way. "Well, good morning, babe, or good evening I should say, start of my day. Looks like it's going to be a wonderful one!"

"I'm just so happy to be alive that I think I could break out into some type of happy day, or night song."

"I was not going to let anyone hurt you."

"I know. But there were three vampires against one if they had so chosen to eat me, and ask questions later, when they first walked in the door with us asleep. The what-ifs are terrifying."

"Maybe there is something to this mixing of creatures or whatever you want to call us. Any other time I would have sensed them approaching, woken up. But, with your magic surrounding me, I didn't, I overslept again. Do we weaken each other?" Isaac asked.

"Actually, that was probably just side effects from the spell I put on you last night. The amount of magic I used, the energy required of you to endure it, probably just dulled other parts of you as well. It happens, residual energy, side effects not unlike drugs. I'm sorry. At the time I was helping you to calm down, but then my motives became purely selfish. Night before, who knows why, but you'd gone through a lot even if your body doesn't work exactly like a man's anymore. Surely it can be exhausted, lots of stress, less blood. Who knows? Again, I'm sorry for any part I've played in it."

"Don't apologize for last night, or the one before that. And maybe it's best they know. Maybe it is time to end this feud. While that seems like a huge, insurmountable task, what if we could just change a few minds, start small?" Isaac asked with a shrug of his shoulders.

"You know, I don't know what is going on with Achim and this whole ruler thing, other than I will cut him some slack having just lost his son, but I know in our clan that the elders, the majority, are nice, good people. It's just that this group who took over the lead coven, the

council as you would call it, they've lost our true path. Well, they have become crazy with the power and have reverted back to the carefree teenage years way of thinking that if we have these gifts, why not use them to the fullest extent,, even if it abuses our powers and goes against the oath we took to harm none. This group is doing a lot more harm than good. So, maybe Achim, or you, need to go beyond the current council and talk to some elders." Winter offered.

"You know, that was what was happening in our clan too with Drake. Achim wasn't saying anything, ignoring Drake's antics just to be free of controlling, being the leader. Maybe he's feeling guilty now, and tired of it all. Maybe it's more. You see, centuries ago, from what Drake told me, Willa and Achim were living in Germany, married and in love, and expecting their first child. They were attacked one night by vampires, a group looking for new recruits, and turned. Only what the vampires didn't know was that Willa was pregnant. The baby died during her transition. They both took that loss very hard and fled Germany for America. Here they met with others like them, refuges if you will, and they formed a peaceful clan. The story goes, and this comes from Drake, that they turned him one night, I think late eighteen hundreds, after finding him dying after some brutal beating. Drake said they must have turned him because they still wanted that son. So from this dying man they tried to get one. Problem was Achim had been breeding Drake to take over rule of the clan, but Drake didn't turn out to be the son he would have wanted. He wasn't a decent human in life, and therefore wasn't the greatest vamp either. Achim knew he was still stuck ruling."

"So, Achim and Willa were disappointed one again. But then, how did Drake come to rule the clan?"

"Drake tricked him, became what he knew Achim wanted him to be for a time until Achim turned over power to him. Then Drake not only reverted back to who he truly was, but also started recruiting on his own. Hence, Amberlyn, me, and actually a whole host of others, most of who just blended into the group or are still too young to do anything with. Like the guy the witches were messing with last night. Amberlyn and I have many brothers and sisters. But, poor Willa and

Achim, who have for centuries mourned the loss of not only of their humanity but of their lost child, have tried, hoped, that each time another of us is created they will have that son or daughter they can love, who is like them. All they do is get continually disappointed. I think Achim was just too hurt when Drake took over and showed his true colors again to even try to fight him."

"I bet," Winter said, "You were the only one who could have fulfilled that role for Willa and Achim, and you had to leave."

"Please don't give me that kind of credit. I was close to my birth family, but still a boy, a bit wild at times. Once turned, I loved Drake. He was loyal and provided me everything that I needed. But, I wasn't like him. Having to live apart, I was forced to do things to stay alive that I will always regret. I have always hid that from Achim. But, the place I live in California, its pretty much conform or be killed. Sadly, I conformed and I eventually disappointed him too. But, that was where Drake took me, and I didn't have a lot of options. I'm happy to be back here, to be away from that even if only for a few days. Anyway, Achim and Willa visited when they could, but I think they feared leaving Drake here at *The Willows* alone too long. You see, when you have lived as long as Willa and Achim, having to move, start over again in another town every few centuries, gets to be too much. So they try their best to stay in one location as long as they can."

"So, maybe we just need to find the right ones of each clan to get together."

"Maybe you're right. Who could we talk to in your group?"

"You mean who could I talk to. These women are elders, and even though better people, they still would be shocked by a witch and a vampire. More old school than closed minded, you see. I would need to do this alone. Besides, you really need to go smooth things over with Achim. It will make you feel better. Then maybe, without me in the room, you can make him see that he doesn't need to do the big fighting. Or maybe you can change his mind to the cause. I bet under all that grief, all that heart he has been forced to toughen, that he is a good man, right?"

"Right. I just don't want to take you somewhere and drop you off.

This, this…well, I don't know what to call us, but I do know I don't want to lose you, not right now. I've experienced enough of my own loses in this life."

"You are talking about your birth family now aren't you? It was really hard on you to see your cousin and your brother tonight wasn't it?"

"You have no idea what it was like to be so close and not be able to talk to them. And, I want to at least see my parents, to just see what they're like now. But I look like half their son and half a monster, and I can't explain any of it away."

"If I could, would you want your face fixed?"

"I never really thought about it because either way I had to leave The Willows. What I want is another face altogether. Can that be done?"

"Hmm, rather than healing you are talking reconstruction. I have no idea. I do know that there is a mask spell that would make you *look* different for a short amount of time. Maybe then you could have that moment with your parents. When I go back, I could look it up for you, see if it's possible for me to do."

"That would be amazing. I would never be able to repay you for such a thing, if I could talk to them. But, first, we have more important things to work on."

"Sure you could. Repay me I mean. You could be open and honest about your feelings and let me in rather than fighting me because of what I am. If we can't change, then we will never be able to convince anyone else to either," Winter argued.

"I thought I already did that this morning with Achim, confessed what I was feeling."

"You did. It just hasn't really sunk in yet, and I still worry you will keep changing your mind daily as this war carries on, until we can put a stop to it."

"So, what if I make you a promise then, to embrace what I feel for you as we try this next step?"

"That works, but before I go, will you please embrace *me*?"

He pulled her into his arms. "Honestly, I don't know how I'm ever

going to let you walk away from me now.”

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The Vampire's Wolf, Book Two

CHAPTER ONE

Into his arms she fell, knocked them both off balance until they landed on the bed with the grace of lovers long kept apart. That's to say, no beauty or finesse at all; just two bodies which came together, joined as close as they possibly could from head to toe, connected by what felt like the beat of only one heart. Even though the fall was enough to take one's breath away, Amberlyn felt like she'd really taken her first real breath in a long time when Kane's mouth took hers. His lips claimed hers, pressed down hard, consumed her own. He nipped at one spot, kissed another, and parted her lips with his tongue. She relented, gave herself to him, more than willing, ready and able.

As they rediscovered all a simple kiss could be, their limbs tangled together, warred for closeness that would never be enough, could never be enough unless joined as one. Sometimes, not even then.

No matter what people were, no matter what the social laws, regardless of the social conventions, beyond the uninformed beliefs, the rulers of their clans could not police or keep apart two hearts such as theirs – so hopelessly in love. Her Vampire heart wanted a Werewolf and she had to live with the consequences of her actions. They'd held back, not seen each other since her maker, Drake, had been killed when her relationship with Kane went public. Still, no amount of time apart, blood shed, threat of war or all-consuming guilt was going to change the way she felt about Kane.

This week her traitorous, dead heart had broken, had missed Kane and Drake. All she'd really done with her time was lay low as if she'd been told and get pissed about with the way things were. In their small resort town of *the Willows*, in the mountains of Tennessee, Witches and Werewolves and Vampires were supposed to co-exist,

mingle for show in public, but not form relationships and never, ever fall in love. But, sadly, the announcement that she loved Kane had gotten Drake killed and a Witch dead in the crossfire. Now it seemed war had been declared against the clans.

She'd had hours to pine away the last few days, lost in all of her losses, to think on such things – what she'd done right, what she'd done wrong, how to make herself love no one – but there was no reasoning with the cold, dead organ which beat no more in her chest. Though the guilt was a bitch, she would forever long to be in Kane's arms. These were the sad facts, her own catch-twenty-two.

For all that poetry claimed in sickening-sweet language about the heart, love must reside somewhere else. It had to. As one of the undead, her heart simply did not beat. This was another fact, sad or not. It was all in the perspective. Yet, her humanity – well most of it – remained and with it the ability to love, fiercely, deeply, so that the earth felt like it was just about to shatter around her when the object of her affection was not near. Yes, love had to come from somewhere other than the heart; the soul maybe, which must carry an essence or energy of the human she used to be, something that still swirled around inside of her. Yes, she was colder to touch and she had cravings she fought daily for blood, but still, for the most part, she felt basically human, mortal and desperately, head over heels in love with a Werewolf.

She would no longer become the head of her clan like her maker, Drake, had groomed her for. Everyone in the clan, save maybe her Vamp brother, Isaac, and her Vamp grandmother, Willa, blamed her for Drake's death. Probably rightly so. She blamed herself most minutes of the day, the ones that ticked by at a dreadful, slow pace, taunted her with their foolish beat. Achim, her Vamp grandfather, couldn't even look at her. Even when he was forced to speak her name, it was with disgust and pain. While these Vampire family members weren't blood family as in her family of origin—who by the way were people she wished never to think about again—these Vampires were her family of creations, the ones she wanted to be around. Going by the created bloodlines of the maker made more

sense to her. Her human family had nearly destroyed her when she was alive anyway. Yet now, she felt cast aside, yet again, by another family. Orphaned by choice or by force still sucked either way.

"Amberlyn, baby, what's wrong? In the last few minutes, I've lost you. You are in my arms, but still, miles away in your mind. Do you regret calling me and coming here to meet?" Kane questioned.

"No. No! Fuck!" Amberlyn grit her teeth, tried to hold in all that boiled up inside her. "Kane, fuck it all, things have just gotten so messed up in our world. This war we started, just by admitting our love, is so frustrating, because it's so ridiculous…and I can't make anyone see any reason as to why their thinking is so old-fashioned and corrupt. In a day and age where people are fighting for gay rights and have gained – in some states – the right to gay marriage, our clans still won't let Vamps and Weres date, will barely let Witches and Vampire talk... Shit! And, best of all is the reason I called you to meet me, my brother, Isaac, after coming back into town, has been with a Witch. And, I mean *been* with a Witch. We caught them this evening in bed, all naked and shit together. You can't stop what the heart or body wants, damn it!" The words hissed through her teeth. "It seems the heart and body don't categorize beings the way the clans heads do. Just because some are foolish enough to want to control others they know nothing about, doesn't make them not want to be together! Am I even making sense any more?"

"I was able to follow what you were saying. But, babe, you need to calm down," Kane said in a rush when Amberlyn finally took a breath. "Maybe this is a good thing. Maybe with two couples, and who knows if there are more who've crossed the lines of the clans social conventions, then maybe these unwritten, old social laws will be changed. I mean, they're really nothing more than prejudices formed by fears of the unknown, passed down through the generations. Isn't that the way it always goes? Problem is that fights seem to erupt quickly to keep these prejudices alive and well."

"Maybe one day," Kane spoke more slowly now, like he repeated a daydream, "just like you dreamed about being groomed to lead the Vampires, a couple like us will be able to be together in the open. I

felt like I was dying all week, not being able to see you. They've been guarding me like a common criminal. I swear, I can't believe they didn't put me in shackles and beat me. The guy who killed Drake, while he got in trouble for killing and for making the clan look bad really, he was also revered while I was shamed.

"But today," he continued, "luckily when you called, they were taking care of other matters, like what to do to those Witches who last night dared to play with a were and a Vamp, nearly bringing them to blows and blowing their cover as other worldly creatures in front of humans. Things are going to get bad before they get better I fear. We may just need to leave *the Willows* altogether. I mean, I have clan loyalty, but I'm no longer sure my presence or yours is welcome or wanted. Though I do feel an obligation to help stop the war we started. We really need to end the fighting the right way so others like us… I mean, they have to be out there. Isaac and his Witch can't be the only other couple… Anyway, we need to make it so that others like us can be together in the future. What do you think, Amberlyn?"

"Maybe we should just leave," Amberlyn spoke to the mattress in a forlorn voice, deep and slow. "I felt an obligation at first too, still do in many ways, but everything has changed in just a matter of days. There isn't a chance in hell of me becoming the leader of my clan. Although, it seems Achim and Isaac don't want the position either. So, the question there becomes who will take over? We, or at least me… I'm always going to be blamed for Drake's death. So, I can't do it. I can't lead. No one would feel safe, let alone listen to me now. I ran away once and started over when I was just a teenage human. Of course, I got myself killed or turned into a Vampire in the process, but it hasn't turned out so bad. Okay, until now. But, right now, all I want is you."

"Then show me, babe," Kane hissed. "It's feels like it has been too long since we've been in each other's arms."

"I know. I want you too." She gave him a quick kiss, but pulled away again with an abrupt a motion. "I just…I'm so conflicted. Loyalty and love, why do they have to be in opposition to each other? Why in this world do so many bad things happen? Abuse? Death? I've

had too much of it in my life."

"I know, babe. I'll do whatever you want. I love you. You know that no matter what, I'll hold you. Even if I can only hold you in my heart and my memories. I'd let you go, if that was what you want… even though I don't want to, even though it would kill me to do so. What I want, especially after these past few days with my were clan, being away from you, hearing all the bad things being said about Vampires, getting ready for retaliation because one of mine killed one of yours… all I want is to run away from it all. Not because I can't face them, the challenge, the fight, but because I can't face the time without you. I know life already made you run away once, but you ran away alone. This time would be different. This time we only need to run away just past the social conventions that keep us apart. And we would run together, hand in hand."

Kane paused and she watched as emotions flickered through his eyes, lightened them, then darkened them, while the muscles in his face moved a touch with each feeling he experienced. He ran his hand through his hair before he spoke again.

"I can't get you out of my mind," he whispered as he reached out to touch her. "Your pale skin, the glow of it in the moonlight, I just want to touch you. Your lips, so red, crimson, like the blood you drink, it turns me on, not repels me. We are each animals in our own way. I accept you and you accept me. We need nothing else but to lay naked together and kiss slowly, make love, for the rest of our days to be happy. Why can they not see that, want happiness for us rather than loneliness and despair?"

"I know. And running again, it isn't what I want," Amberlyn sighed loudly. "But, if that's what it takes for us to be together, then I'm ready. There was never a chance though to ask how this silent feud between the clans got started years and years ago. And, we know how we can kill each other, but no one has thought to ask, if we could join together without doing so. Man can kill man for cripes sake and everyone lets them co-exist – well to some extent anyway. Only problem I see is, I don't want to have you for just a certain amount of years. I want you for centuries. You said before you would turn to be

with me forever, but what we don't know is whether a were can be turned Vamp too."

"Maybe all we need is the help of a good Witch." Kane laughed as he gave Amberlyn a quick tickle and peck on the cheek, reminiscent of how he used to before all of the craziness had gotten started.

She smiled back at him, but her heart wasn't in it. She felt troubled like the weight of more than just her world was suddenly on her shoulders. Even in the arms of the man she wanted more than anything else in this world, at this moment everything was so complicated, she couldn't even luxuriate in being near to him. *Damn them all!*

"Bite your tongue," Amberlyn finally answered while she forced a wiggle and a smile at his touch, though she didn't feel anything but self-preservation and stone cold at the moment. By his fallen face, she could tell he was well aware of the fact. "Though, I may know where to find us one, if this thing with Isaac and Winter gets serious," she stated the obvious for some unknown reason. Her mind felt like she was human again, one who had taken too much over-the-counter cold medicine.

"Isaac and Winter?" Kane said, his voice rose as he leaned over her.

"Yeah, why?"

"You do realize that the Witches have been claiming she was taken, as well as saying that is why they played such games last night?"

"Oh, I'm well aware of the intricacies of the situation. Achim was beside himself to find them together in bed. He was spouting off nonsense the whole time until I just had enough and took off for you."

"And here I am. Use me, baby. My body is here for your diversion, your pleasure. It's been too long since we've been together. We deserve this, this moment alone, to pretend the rest of them don't exist. We can get back to the war soon enough."

"It's only been a few days, but it does seem like it's been forever," she pouted.

"Exactly. Too long. Let me make love to you, however you want it, rough, slow, kinky." He winked, a grin spreading across his face.

Amberlyn felt Kane's eyes on her, the potent animal magnetism

they possessed even if she wasn't the same species. She drank him in as well, the way his jeans clung to his powerful thighs; the sheer power of them thrilled her, the muscles defined, rugged, even through the denim. As he lounged on his side, one strong thigh over hers, she caught a glimpse of his ass too. And while it was amazing in jeans – full, tight, rounded – it was her undoing when it was bare.

He knew her too well and this she liked too. Not many in her life, human or undead, had taken the chance to get to know her. Not even her biological parents – if that's what you would call those two idiots and not those in the system who'd failed to protect her from them. Drake had been the first to really see her for who she was, or all she could be. She had to believe that given the chance, he would've fought for her and Kane. If she hadn't believed that, she wouldn't have revealed their relationship to him that night. Although in hindsight – twenty-twenty as always – she shouldn't have gone off half-cocked. She should've gotten hold of her emotions and told Drake first, alone.

But something had gotten into her that night, something dark, angry and tired of being beaten or abused for choices life seemed to make for her; like who her parents were or who her heart chose to fall in love with. It was an old anger she thought gone or used up. Apparently, it'd only been buried. It had reared its ugly head and put a whole town as well as three clans, at unrest. Drake thought she could lead a whole clan. All she'd proven was that she could cause trouble and couldn't be trusted.

"My life has been one mistake after another. I won't let you be one of them too. We will leave tonight. Maybe I'm a danger to my kind, maybe even to you. But, without you I'm nothing… once again." She looked up into Kane's eyes, touched by the way his face had grimaced, his eyes had fallen closed for a second. He shook his head, denied her accusations against herself. He loved her. "You, Kane, are one of the very few good things that I've ever gotten in this life. I believe Drake would be behind us in our decision to go out and live for ourselves. He certainly lived that way himself, to a fault sometimes. But I won't lose you. Just you and me against this big old world, okay? We will find a way to live. We don't need much right, if we have each other.

You've said that before."

"Right. We can live in a cave if we have to. But I have some money saved up. I can go back and get it when it's safe to do so."

"Me too. I can go back once Isaac is out of Drake's place. He has a safe there. Isaac doesn't need the money. He has plenty from his job as a bounty hunter. So, we stay away from *the Willows*, but also stay close enough until the time comes we can get some money to support us at first."

"It's all worked out. Now, how about some you and me time? You are making me sound pathetic by begging. We have the rest of our lives to make love of course, but let's get started now anyway." His wink made him look dark, sexy and seductive.

When she kissed him again, Amberlyn could hear the tempting beat of his heart. She'd bitten him in the height of the moment already as he always let her give into the bloodlust. It was a myth that just the bite of a Vampire could kill a Werewolf, just as his bite wouldn't be her end either. Drake had let her in on some of the myths that had been propagated to keep the clans apart. They both knew their limits and worked well together as they both liked to ride along the dangerous edges of their boundaries.

Amberlyn took the initiative now, as poor Kane had patiently begged for since they'd arrived. She went right for his neck and he growled at her instinctively. When she tried to be dominant, it roused the animal that lived within him. She liked to tease the wolf. Even being enemies – as her kind had called them – they'd run side by side once, dared the odds, the fates. His wolf, her vampire, under a full moon. With her naked and him covered in fur, they'd proven their kinds could be friends and then some. Okay, so she'd no need to be naked, just wanted to be. But, it'd been so freeing. Just the thought of him in his animal form thrilled her. The fierce power of the animal got her all wet. Finally, she throbbed for the man to thrust inside of her as animalistic and uninhibited as he could.

The two of them could go all night and she was suddenly more than in the mood again. If day sleep caught her before they could move on, she trusted him implicitly to protect her during the daylight hours

while she slept in the hotel room.

His fingers played in her hair as she moved lower. Her kisses fell on his shoulder, explored the ridges and valleys of his muscular chest and abs, all rock hard like an athlete. Kane kissed the top of her head and ran his hands over her back, dug his fingers in to her flesh when she ran her elongated fangs over his nipple. She licked over the grazed, not scratched, but still really sensitive bud. Her hot breath was even more of a sensual tease, and she felt his cock grow thick against her leg.

Once she had his shirt open all the way, she let her fingers play with the dark-brown hair that covered his chest. Good thing she loved her men hairy. He was a beast, human or wolf, and she loved it. The allure of the hair, which converged into a V-shape, pointing her straight into his jeans, was more than she could take. She opened them, peeled them from his body as he laid all spread out on the mattress of their hotel bed. His smile, wide with a bit of a wicked upturn at the corners of his mouth, spurred her on.

She climbed up over him like a wolf herself, ready to devour every inch of him. Her fangs fully extended now, she carefully licked over his erection. She loved watching the muscles in his arms and abs twitch as he kept control, and resisted the urge to jump at the sensations so he wouldn't wound himself on her sharp teeth. When she noticed him focus in on her, her heart leapt. She followed through on the devious thought that had just entered her head. Catching him unaware, she turned him over onto his stomach, pounced onto his back, and pinned him down on the bed. Amberlyn turned toward his feet; she sat on the slope of his back, her fingernails scratched over his ass. She kneaded the flesh, grasped it with her long fingers and the wetness built between her legs. She had her own panties wet.

That's when she decided she needed to be out of them. She still straddled him, made it a challenge – as did his hands, which reached back blindly behind him in an attempt to touch any part of her that he could. He laughed, deep, gravely, a sound that vibrated through her as well and increased her need. His fingertips were everywhere, ran over her ass, touched her back, her hips. Yet, with her on him as she was,

he couldn't get to her sex that wept for him, for the anticipated invasion of his cock pushed up inside her. First things first, though.

As the man moved under her, his struggle more show than anything else, she gently touched his balls, exposed between his thighs. This got him to stop wiggling, to moan, to then grind his erection into the mattress. His ass working, the muscles tightening under her hands, she licked over her fangs.

"May I bite you?"

"Bite me anywhere you like, baby. You obviously have a spot in mind back there. I can practically feel you salivating over it."

"I do. A delicious looking one actually. All nice, firm and rounded. Damn, but you have the best ass." She gave him a playful swat before she leaned over to kiss the beautiful globes. As she snuck her hands around his waist, he lifted his hips enough to let her move her hands under him and wrap her fingers around his erection. As she grasped him tightly, she licked over the right cheek of his ass, sucked on a section of the skin there and brought the blood she could hear rushing through his veins closer to the surface.

He moved his cock through her tight fingers, his ass against her mouth. She knew he was ready when the slight thrust of his hips gave way to a tremor from head to toe. He stiffened and she sunk her fangs into the start of a red circle she'd made on his ass. Immediately he growled, fierce but sensual. He started to move again, slowly this time but she easily followed his rhythm. His dick got harder the more blood she took from him, her bite and saliva enhanced the erotic sensations she knew already overwhelmed her lover. His toes curled, his knees pulled up under his torso, and lifted her off the bed.

Yet, she held onto his body, arms and legs wrapped around him. The entire time her fingers never let up on his cock, which had gotten harder, the veins in it pulsed strongly against her palm. She took a little more blood from him; the warm metallic liquid tasted better than any she'd ever had, quenched –for the moment – every thirst, every hunger. The tight muscles in his ass bunched up, tightened and relaxed, slowed the flow of his life's fluid to let her savor the moment. She watched with a full heart his lower body continued to move to

erratic, unheard beats, react to the pleasure only she could give him.

On all fours now, she hung on for dear life as she pumped him. As she sucked life-giving blood from him, he came with a loud roar he stifled into the pillows on the bed. With her legs wrapped around him tightly, his body rocked back and forth, and made the muscles in his back rub against her clit. She approached that precipice of pleasure as well, and retracted her fangs. Suddenly, he collapsed on the bed, a little to the side of where he'd spent himself all over the comforter.

Having no choice but to fall to the side herself, she quickly licked over the two sexy holes in his ass that she had left behind. Kane made a noise in response like he was ready to go again. Amberlyn had guessed right, because she'd barely gotten to her feet beside the bed when Kane had grabbed her, lifted her up into his arms, kissed her passionately and then tossed her onto the bed.

"Good thing the were in me lets me recover quickly because I want you squirming under me now. I think I'm getting used to the taste of my own blood from your mouth. You bit my ass." Kane laughed the words. "That's new! And, I liked it. Damn, I've missed you and your bites my wild little Vamp."

With that, he was between her legs. He forced her thighs open on the bed, opening her wet pussy to his view. His face looked fierce, like an animal would as it looked upon its prey. And, oh, how she loved that feeling more than anything in the world. Being a fierce predator herself now, something she relished as a survivor of child abuse, she willingly gave up her power to him. Only, she wanted Kane to dominate her in the bedroom, because she knew he would never dream of it, if it were anywhere else.

Being a Vampire, she liked it rough. Kane, she knew, he'd have to fight his animal now that he'd come. He would eat her with a wild abandon. She opened for him as wide as she could even as his fingers pressed into her folds, spread her open, and revealed the flesh, which pulsed with want inside them. His tongue brushed over her skin, his first taste right over her opening. Her inner walls contracted and heat began to surface on her cool skin.

The swipes of his tongue were heavy. The sucking of her flesh into

his mouth was harsh; the probing of his fingers up inside her opening was fast and rough. She loved every minute of it, hissed and clawed. When he nipped at her clit, drew the engorged nub into his mouth, and sucked hard, she came. Her hips bucked toward him and she ground her wet sex against his mouth. Strong as ever, he held onto her, let her ride out her pleasure. The fierce waves of it made even him growl until he leapt off the bed. As her body trembled in the aftermath of her orgasm, Kane shifted. She shuddered.

She found herself naked, laid spread eagle on the bed, at the mercy of his wolf. Her body pulsed with desire as tiny electric currents still ran through her core. Even though it'd been drilled into her head that they were natural enemies, that he could or would rip her head off with one bite, Amberlyn felt completely safe.

He snarled. Saliva dripped from his bared incisors. The side of his lip raised and curled, trembled over his teeth. Right beside her he stayed for a few minutes, sniffed her, looked over her with his wolf's eyes. Then he started to pace at the foot of the bed. She laid perfectly still, not because she was afraid, but because she liked the way the wolf looked at her, took in every inch of her body. She got excited all over again by the small sense of danger he provided.

Kane had just gotten carried away in loving her. That he could no longer hold his wolf back after he'd pleasured her, she took as a damn big compliment. Maybe no one would ever understand that, or them for that matter. But who the fuck cared? A part of her craved, understood, felt comforted by a bit of danger, some darkness. Her base desires she wouldn't analyze. She'd had enough of that crap in her younger years. With Kane, she felt accepted and protected regardless of any possible jeopardy or shadows. So, she waited with great patience for the wolf to come to her once he'd calmed down.

Several minutes later, the large animal walked up beside where she still laid on the bed. She wasn't stupid enough to make any sudden movements or even to sit up. She stayed at his level, just beneath him actually. Who said a Vampire couldn't submit to anyone and why should they have to always be the bastard on the top?

The wolf sniffed at her body, her hair, her breasts, her stomach,

and her still dripping sex. Slowly, she reached out her hand, encouraging the animal to smell her again, to come closer. Then Kane, as his wolf, laid his head on her stomach. She was able to pet his head, stroke his beautiful long snout, which had fur as white as snow on the tip of it around his black nose. He was so warm, so soft. Amberlyn loved how his thick hair slid between her fingers. His ear twitched and his eyes blinked closed for a second, like a wink. This brought a small giggle from her, something she only did in Kane's presence. The wolf looked quite pleased with himself. She swore the way he held his snout, back and tight, panting, that it had to be the equivalent of a smile.

"I love you, Kane. I don't care who understands it or who condones it. I just love you. We're going to be together forever. We'll find a way to make you the first hybrid, a Werewolf who can live forever as a Vampire, so that you can live forever with me. If I could become a Werewolf instead, I would do that too, but I can't. Heredity is your curse, anyone can get mine, my love."

The wolf nuzzled his snout into her stomach and she giggled at the feel of his whiskers scratching over her skin. Opening her eyes when he moved off her, she gazed deeply into the wolf's eyes. Sometimes, she could see Kane in them, a flicker of the man. Now though, a hint of mischievous light sparkled in their depths. The wolf sniffed her again, lower, between her legs. Then, he licked her once with his massive tongue over the sensitive flesh. The caress gave her whole body a jolt before he turned back into a man.

"Bad wolf," she laughed as she swatted Kane's shoulder playfully while he climbed back on the bed and on top of her. "You've never done that before."

"I wanted to claim you in all of my forms. When you turn me I shall bite you as well, on the shoulder, in my wolf form. Vampire or not, you are going to be my mate and that is part of the ritual."

"I'm yours, babe, whether you're man or animal. I want you to make me yours in every way. Someday soon, I hope."

"Thanks to the Gods who created this fucked up world for that," he whispered, then kissed her hard on the mouth. At the same time his

tongue entered to war with hers for possession, his cock entered her. Both where demanding of her body and she clung to him greedily, took all the man offered. Their emotions, their sensations, their love climbed together, built, played off each another until they came together this time.

She had barely begun to catch her breath though, when her phone began to ring from wherever her jeans were on the floor.

As she groaned, he growled and they disentangled themselves. She moved through the clothes on the floor to search frantically for the ringing phone, which she knew might communicate good or bad news. Still, she was desperate for news period. Whether she wanted to admit it or not, she missed *the Willows* – the only place she'd ever truly called home in her eighteen years as a human and her three years as a Vampire.

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CHAPTER TWO

"Amberlyn, are you okay?" It was her brother Isaac on the phone.

"Yes, I'm fine." She straightened her back and stood tall. "I'm with Kane outside of *the Willows*."

"Yes, I figured. Look, sorry things got so nasty earlier. I think Achim is battling some of his own demons. Not all of it has to do with you or me, or even Drake's death. Anyway, Winter and I got to talk after you left and got an idea to help change things. I mean, if the clans are going to war, we might as well get some good change out of it, right? I assume you want to come back, be with Kane out in the open without opposition – well war at least. Correct me, if I'm wrong. Anyway, separately tonight we went to the elders of the clans. We realized in our discussions that the groups leading the clans now – well at least the Witches and Weres, since we Vamps don't have an official leader right now – are young and well, a tad corrupt. They seem to be more prejudiced than cautious when it comes to not letting the clans be together. So, like I was saying, we went beyond them to their elders, the past leaders, to see if we could get anywhere. I spoke to Achim, of course, who has apologized and is a bit calmer about it all now.

"Anyway, long story short," Isaac continued, "tomorrow night at sundown, we are having a meeting of the clan leaders and elders to try to discuss some issues. Each have agreed, whether reluctantly or not, to a peaceful meeting, indoors, at that abandoned church at the edge of *the Willows*. Winter and I would like you and Kane to come. The four of us will stay to the back, hidden. But, if things would happen to go really well, then maybe we will be able to present our sides of this fight. We could tell how it is and can be between us, Vampire and Witch or Vampire and Werewolf. Maybe we could dispel a few old myths. We can let them know by example that it *can* be safe. Safety, we think that has always been the issue – where it started

anyway, mistrust of what we don't know and thus fear. It's the way of America, right? Why should it be any different in the paranormal realms that it is with the humans? Although, I think the humans may be further along with all of this now, breaking down the stereotypical walls and finding acceptance of each others differences."

"Really, Isaac? Do you think that is a good idea? You know what happened when I tried."

"With all due respect, dear sister, we are going about things a little differently this time. Achim is acting as our head and has agreed to be open-minded. I think he is just more concerned about losing us now. Drake's death hit him hard. In the hundreds of years he has walked on this earth all he has done is tried to replace the son he lost, always getting disappointed when the Vampires created were not a human, but a Vampire, go figure, even if he didn't realize that. I know, I'm no psychologist, but I do know what it's like to run from what hurts you rather than to deal with it or face it. He has just done it for centuries rather than a decade like me."

"I think I know what you mean," Amberlyn conceded. "Though my own human past still haunts me from time to time, as a Vampire I'm not forced to face my human life anymore. I mean, I'm a runaway, but I act like my childhood never happened, like I was born a Vampire."

"Will you come then, Amberlyn, you and Kane?" She heard the desperation in Isaac's voice and knew it, understood it, knew now how far gone her brother was for his Witch. She didn't understand how it'd happened so quickly. Her and Kane had worked together for the last two years at the cove in *the Willows*; night watch on the beach to keep tourists off it and out of the water. They'd had nothing but time to get to know each other.

But, who was she to judge? She'd never truly known a lot about Isaac, however they both seemed to have in common the want of a family once turned. Isaac had a great human family he'd needed to replace, and she just had flat out needed one. It was because of this fact she often went with Drake to visit Isaac in California. She felt bad that he had a family, a human one, who he could no longer see. That had to be just as bad perhaps as having a human family you never

wanted to see again, even when you were human. Either way, it was a need of love and acceptance. That concept she understood.

She'd agreed for her and Kane to show up, talked with Isaac a little more trying to pull some information about Winter out of him, and then had gotten off the phone to explain the conversation to Kane. She climbed back into bed with her man, just about an hour before the sun came up. They snuggled under the covers, bodies intertwined; like she hoped they one day could be every morning. He was just going to have to learn to sleep during the day and be awake at night.

"So, Isaac has it bad for this Witch, huh? Well, I'm happy for him, and it's good news for us, right? Although, I'll go to this meeting of the clans, I don't hold out a lot of hope as to the outcome of the event. But we have to start somewhere. This is our fight. We should go back. We will just be careful. Smart. We'll stay to the back, always with an escape route in mind and take off at the first sign of trouble."

"Sounds like a plan. We have to at least try. Oh, I'm sure you heard, but Isaac agreed to bring me some of Drake's money. He sounded more than happy to give it to me."

"And, this touches you, you cold-hearted Vamp." He smiled at her before he kissed her forehead.

"It does, though an animal like you, I've no idea how you could understand it," she said in her best, sweet-southern-belle voice.

They both laughed. One of the great things about them was even after their feelings changed, they'd continued the practice of shooting little barbs at each other, ones like they used to exchange with each other in the beginning. They'd gone from being forced together in an otherwise, most nights bored to tears job, to looking forward to having the excuse to see each other, to being lovers. Their story was amazing really, and she hoped to be able to share this with the clans soon.

As the sun came up they made love, slowly, lovingly, her chest to his, him buried deep inside her, arms wrapped around each other until they both came. Their *I Love You*'s were breathy with their bliss. Kane held Amberlyn as she fell asleep.

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CHAPTER THREE

Lit by lots of candles, the old church looked haunted as people moved about inside on such a dark night. The moon, but a sliver, was no damn help at all. Amberlyn felt a chill snake its way down her already cold spine as she got closer. She snuck hand-in-hand through the woods of *the Willows* with Kane, as if they were common criminals who approached to watch their own trial. It may not be an actual trial, but it sure felt like it.

What was worse for Amberlyn, since she'd grown up in a house where a church was attended and the hand of discipline was heavy, was going to actually have to walk into the that type of building again. She hated churches. Her own personal beliefs aside, which were skewed and confused with all life had handed her, had nothing to do with her feelings about the place and some of the people there, the ones who used religion for their own sick agendas. Of course, she was aware that many churches had many nice people in them too, but after her twisted childhood, any church held painful memories for her.

Ingrained in her memory, though she buried it, ignored it as best she could, was what it was like to be inside one, beside her parents. She remembered all too well what would come later once they got home. The sermon often had inspired her father to beat whatever bad could be in her, out of her that day. Tonight she'd hide where the choir usually sat behind the pulpit. She'd try to focus on the new rather than the old. At least she hoped that would be the case.

Isaac and Winter hid there like common conspirators as well. Never had she felt closer to her brother. Isaac looked at her and Kane, down at their clasped hands and smiled. When he looked back up at Amberlyn, he winked. From her point of view, he looked gorgeous, such chiseled features, dark hair, blue eyes – the perfect characteristics for a Vamp. Yet, on his other side, she knew the accident that had ended his human life had also scarred his face. She was happy to know that Winter could see past all that and more. Isaac had not had it easy since he'd become a Vampire, turned by Drake

after a car accident. Yet, for whatever reason – one of life's sick mysteries – he'd never fully healed from those injuries like he should have.

Just like his face, Isaac's nature had two sides. He'd had no choice but to live apart from *the Willows* so his real family who still lived here wouldn't recognize him. He lived a hard and unsavory lifestyle to survive as a Vamp without a clan. How he lived reflected more of what most thought of their kind, namely the other paranormals, or what Witches and Werewolves made Vampires out to be – vicious and dangerous. Isaac made his money as a bounty hunter, and his scarred face, enhanced by the shadows of the night, made him a guy no one wanted to mess with.

One would think that those in *the Willows*, those gathering before them now, after all these years, would see the difference. That all paranormals had dual-natures and some chose to do good rather than bad, as with any species. Maybe it was just too hard to bother to weed out the good ones. She probably wouldn't have tried to see a good side in a Werewolf, if the staff at the Willows resort hadn't insisted on one female and one male night guard on the beach. They'd thought somehow that would save them certain types of social issues, possible embarrassing situations due to skinny-dipping incidents. Good for them, bad for her. But her boss, well her ex-boss as she hadn't shown up for work since Drake's death, would never understand the implications of what he done to her people with such a simple human decision.

Of course, her boss thought her and Kane were human too. So what did the fool mortal know anyway? She couldn't exactly put any fault on him, though at the moment she tried her best. Why, she had no idea. Her brain raced as fast as her heart.

The air in the little church was muggy for spring. It was so packed that the body count alone made the temperature rise. She had trouble breathing, her anxiety on the rise from the moment she'd walked in the back door. Add to that the thick air that stuck in her lungs, ones she didn't even need to use, but had been out of nervous habit alone at the moment.

She'd never witnessed such a meeting in her existence as a Vampire. The social conventions between the clans until now had been obeyed or maybe secretly broken. Again, surely her and Kane couldn't be the first. Still, she was surprised when an elder Witch stood up first, flanked by the young who comprised their council. Amberlyn assumed her words shook from age likely more than nerves.

"We find ourselves at war here. Witches, Werewolves, and Vampires. We gather here tonight though to see whether we can't come to some sort of understanding, some sort of change, compromise, which will end the bloodshed between us before it gets out of hand and exposes our true natures to the humans here in the Willows," the old Witch began. "The social laws we have between the clans were most probably created originally with safety in mind, and perpetuated for that same reason. No one knew really, if it was safe for the clans to intermix. Speaking as a Witch, I have my magic, but know too that against a quick attack by a strong Vampire, my magic may not save me. When relationships develop and have problems, as all of them do, we feared the possible consequences."

"But, now…" the old Witch sighed, yet continued to speak, her voice feeble but determined, "Now we have proof that the clans can indeed become romantically involved, safely it seems. So, maybe enough is enough. Maybe we should stop hating each other, stop fearing each other and see how that works for a while. Maybe we need to have something like old-fashioned mixers. Not to find dates, but to find friends among the other clans to get to know each other as people first. Of course, there would need to be some parameters set up first…"

In the beginning, for the most part everyone there was attentive and respectful. Not much had been said either way to agree or disagree with the Witch who had spoken. Yet, when she mentioned interaction, possibly specific dates to see how such interactions with each other would work, a low rustle of voices started to murmur in the room like wind blowing through dry leaves. Looking out the window, Amberlyn had to remind herself of the green everywhere, the warmth rather than chill of the current season.

Soon though, the murmur took on a voice and one of the young Witches on the council stood up to take the pulpit from her elder.

"If that is what you are proposing, to let just anyone have relations, say Witch and Vampire or Werewolf and Vampire, friend or lover, then why not come out to humans too? I mean, we know that each of our clans have dated humans and that it has never worked out since somehow, someone always slips up and the humans find out the truth. Then there are spells and glamoring, and a paranormal with a broken heart since the pathetic human can't remember a blessed thing. So, if we are going to get idiotic, let's just start now. Bring in the first set of humans and get the Vampires over here."

Amberlyn glanced up over the wood in front of her to see what kind of stunt the Witch was up to, only to have her heart drop, her breathing stop when she caught sight of the tied up and struggling humans they dragged down the isle of the church.

Of course, she'd thought she'd stopped breathing until a scream escaped her lips when she swore her father looked her right in the eye. Only, it wasn't her Vampire father, because Drake was dead. It was her human father; the true monster she'd run from three years ago.

"Amber!" He yelled. "Shit, is that Amber? I should have known you were fucking alive, you no good whore. What is this all about you bitch?"

Beside him, Amberlyn's mother only started to sob. Amberlyn didn't hate the woman the way she did her father. In fact she felt sorry for her. At the same time, she also didn't have any warm cozy feelings for the woman who'd been abused as well, yet had never had enough strength to stand up for herself or her poor daughter.

The younger Witch from the council who'd spoken, Amberlyn believed her name was Sashia, walked down to Amberlyn's father as the uproar started around all of them. The Vampires closed in around Amberlyn's father. The Werewolves stood and yelled – demanded to know what kind of idiotic scheme the Witch's were up to. Some of the Witches laughed while others looked shocked by Sashia's actions. The place was in chaos.

Isaac and Kane now stood as well, their arms supported Amberlyn. She was grateful, leaned on them. She didn't even try to decipher all the voices in the room. All she could see was the monster who'd beaten her, abused her mentally as well, for so many years. She really thought years ago, when she'd ran away, that she'd never again have to lay eyes on him again; a man who was human, but the worst kind of evil she'd ever met. He made every Vampire she'd ever come in contact with look like a saint.

All Amberlyn heard was the rushing of the blood in her ears as Winter rushed forward to deal with the Witches and the arguments which had erupted. Next thing she knew, magic filled the room, her lungs, her body. She could feel it, an invasive energy, one slightly electric, unmistakable after living a few years among a bunch of Witches.

Her fangs descended. Bloodlust grew inside her, overwhelmed the fear, the rage she'd felt already. She fought the urge to leap forward, to feed. The reaction to fight against the urge for blood had almost become instinctual to the Vampires in *the Willows* who lived among the humans, locals and tourists. The Witches hadn't counted on their spell to bring about a primal instinct in the Vampires, their bloodlust. They hadn't expected that the spell would be overtaken by an instinct to deny bloodlust, which had been long cultivated among Vampires who lived among humans. Right now, whether her parents lived or were torn apart was probably a crapshoot. She damned the feelings within her that cared at all about their safety.

Weird though, the Witches took quite the chance, being pretty much human themselves. The spell just showed how stupid and reckless Sashia was. That idea came into reality though as a Vampire in the pews leapt over the seats toward the Witches who were in a circle around her father. A flick of the Witch's wrist froze the Vampire in his tracks. So, the blessed Witches were prepared. She should've known. Her heart beat franticly to even think of what else they had up their magical little sleeves.

While Vampires all over the church stood as if they were frozen too, in a fight with what was being done to them verses their own

desires. The Witches lead her parents up to her. Her father said nothing. That was something she never thought she'd see, that ass silent. But then again, his daughter was now a fanged-being that could hurt him. With her eyes black and her fangs extended, she probably looked to him like a mythical creature from fiction. A laugh caught her, one strange and sadistic, as the realization hit her how she'd become the incarnate of the evil he used to claim was in her when she was truly an innocent little human girl.

Her insides jumped. The nerve endings under her skin pulsed, and she braced herself as the Witches pushed her father right up in front of her. He stood just inches away. They had served her up the option for revenge on a silver platter. A hiss escaped her. The smell of the slime-ball's blood actually invited and revolted her at the same time.

"Amberlyn, you are truly evil," her father said in a low voice, one unlike any she'd ever heard him use before. Disbelief and real fear showed in his eyes. She had put it there just as he had done to her hundreds of times. For a moment, everything was not so bad after all. Revenge was sickening sweet.

"Amberlyn," Kane said beside her, "Look at me, babe. Are you okay?"

She looked at him, all her emotions on the surface, showing in her eyes. But, it was when that first tear slipped over her cheek that Kane shifted into his animal. She knew he wanted to rip her father apart. Kane loved her. He'd heard all of the stories of her past. He'd said before, that given the chance, he would kill the man. The Witches had handed the man over to him on a silver platter too.

"Kane, please, no!" she yelled to her own surprise and then burst into tears.

How had they known though about my past? Why did the clan of Witches pick my parents to bring here into this mess? She had imagined the man being tortured and killed so many times in her human life. Even when she was first a Vampire, she'd imagined what it would be like to kill him herself. Why should it matter now if he was killed or not?

"Do you see what your runaway daughter, the ingrate, has become

sir? She's not only a Vampire, but she's screwing a Werewolf. Aren't you proud, sir? Don't you think that all of us should live out in the open together in peace and love?" The Witch actually cackled, her pleasure in the situation more then obvious.

"You bitch," her father's voice shook, but with anger or fear, who knew. He'd spoken to Amberlyn, ignored the Witch that taunted him at the moment. "I should have killed you when I had the chance. I was right. You are an abomination—"

Just then Achim had come up and grabbed her father at the same time Kane had leapt onto the man. Vampire, Werewolf and demon-slash-pious-man, all went down. There was a growl, a rip of flesh and an ear-piercing, girl-like scream from the man who'd been the source of all of her nightmares – awake and asleep – since she could remember.

She fell to her knees, unsure what she was upset about. Her feelings all whirled through her mind, confusing her, so it took a moment to realize that the magic was gone. Isaac was beside her again, his arm around her shoulders as he pulled her into his side. More than half the church had already emptied out during the scuffle.

It took some time, but things calmed down. The Vampires had returned to normal and stood around, waited to be there, if they were needed. Kane was a man again, but most of the Werewolves had fled rather than stay and support him. The Witches were all gone. A dead silence fell over the room.

Achim and Kane started to apologize to her. She wasn't sure for what, but she silenced them when she raised one hand and half-heartedly shook her head. Her eyes were on her mother who sat with a glazed look in her eyes, obviously in shock. Amberlyn felt nothing really. She had nothing left in her at the moment. She was dead inside in more ways than one.

"What do you want us to do, Amberlyn," Isaac asked. She noticed that Winter was under his other arm. So, all the Witches had left but one. She smiled at her, a small, forced upturn of her mouth, which soon fell.

"Bury him. I'm fine. He was dead to me anyway," Amberlyn

whispered to Isaac.

"No Sis," Isaac continued, "I meant with your mother."

She looked over at her. The woman really didn't see anything but her dead husband. She felt bad for her one more time, to have had to witness the man so brutally ripped apart. But, then again, Amberlyn was well aware that this was the only chance the woman had at a real life, whether in the woman's messed up head she wanted it or not.

"Take her back home, to her own house. Glamour her to forget tonight and tell her that her husband died and was buried when they were away or something like that. Whatever story works. She has no friends there anyway. Maybe she will wake up and leave, get out, make something of her life away from the monster she married. She's being given a second chance at life, one she wouldn't take herself. It's her problem what she does with the opportunity."

Achim spoke up and motioned to two Vampires to help him do as Amberlyn requested.

"Where do you want to go, Amberlyn," Isaac asked. "Do you want to come back to Drake's with me?"

"No. I want to go home, to my apartment. I want Kane to take me. Do you think that would be safe?" she asked as she looked at Kane in time to see the poor man sigh with relief. He should have known by now that she could never be mad at him. Yes, she'd never seen him kill anything before, and this was her father, but he was also the man who'd given her life and then proceeded to take it away little by little. She smiled, all she had to offer him, to let him know that she wasn't mad in any way, about anything, in case he had any lingering doubts.

"I think so," a Werewolf named Rick, the alpha of the Were clan spoke. "If anything, tonight has shown us how you and Kane feel about each other and that maybe the Werewolves and Vampires need to unite against the Witches."

"Not all of the Witches. Just the leaders of their main coven right now," Isaac spoke up as he squeezed Winter close to him.

"You're right, I guess. They obviously all are not the same. They did call this meeting, but did they call it just to do this, or was this mess just the leaders?" Rick asked.

“The elders truly didn’t know what those few were planning. Sashia and her evil coven were pissed that the elders were working over their heads. Leader or not, the Witches have to listen to their elders. Sashia doesn’t like that age-old law at all because it doesn’t suit her own diabolical plans. Us Witches have a problem right now until Sashia and her coven are brought down, maybe even stripped of their powers. Of course, all of the covens in our clan would have to be present to decide if such a thing were necessary. It would be ugly, I can tell you that. But, soon, we may have no choice. They are out of control.”

Kane and Amberlyn accepted sympathies and said their good-byes until Amberlyn feared she couldn’t stand up on her own another minute. She stood on shaky legs as the night had almost come to an end. The damned hunger for blood had stayed with her, made even a rodent sound good about now. She’d never gotten this tired, this hungry before as day sleep started to settle in. She guessed this was what a diabetic must feel like and felt sorry for them instead of for herself. It had always been a good habit of hers to remind herself that somewhere out there, someone else was worse off.

Long ago as a little girl, tired and hungry after being beaten, unable to sleep, she’d learned not to feel sorry for herself. It was a useless waste of energy, which changed nothing, only robbed a person who had nothing of any bit of joy they may be able to stumble upon. And she’d had very little joy. She had kept to herself so the other kids would never find out her secret. Her father had always threatened that if she ever told those who didn’t understand what a low-life waste she was, how she deserved only punishment for her sins, if those people came for him, some day he would find her again and kill her. Bloodied, knowing nothing but pain and loneliness, she didn’t doubt the man.

Somehow as a young girl she’d moved past wondering what she’d done wrong and only wished for death. If she was as bad as this man said, why was she here? Then a few days later she would rally, live, maybe just to piss the man off, or in the hope of someday running away. She wished to live free among other sinners where she would

be accepted. She figured they had to exist and took to dreaming of colonies of those who were like her. In the meantime, she'd thought on those out there that must have it worse than her and tried to be grateful for the normal days, the ones between beatings where she had a home, clothes, and books – a world to get lost in. Never, even in her wildest of those dreams though, had she imagined herself in this clan, a Vampire, but it seemed appropriate now.

And, her clan – her grandfather really– had killed the monster, alongside her lover. She had to let it all go. These thoughts and emotions were not worth being sorted out. Achim had not said anything to her when he left, just given her a hug, the first since Drake's death. So, she chose to be grateful for just that. All that were left in the church now were two Vampires with her mother. The woman hung limply in their arms, acknowledged them as nothing more than support she assumed – if the woman could see anything at all.

With her father's body gone, Amberlyn's mother's eyes had glazed over. Amberlyn touched the woman's face. Her mother felt clammy, but didn't react. When Amberlyn felt for a pulse at the woman's throat, it was fast, but weak, another sign of shock. Then her mother started to mumble, but no one there could make out anything she said.

"Do you need to say good-bye?" The one Vampire – actually another brother of hers who she rarely saw – asked her. The man was one of Drake's many converts to stay in the Willows, but one who also stayed to himself after his conversion. This one had told Drake that he wanted nothing to do with the politics of the clan, just a quiet life. This one seemed to Amberlyn to be almost brooding about what he'd become. But, who was she to judge?

This brother was another embodiment of diversity within one person. Maybe becoming a Vampire did that to you. Everyone called this bloodthirsty Vampire Devin. He was one who often took off to actually feed on humans, but kept to himself. Though an obviously strong person, if the rumor that he had come from a street gang was accurate, he'd always seemed a tad bit depressed anytime Amberlyn

had contact with him. But, each of them had things they missed about being human. It was just how they reacted to those loses that shaped their new personalities it seemed.

“No, Devin, but thank you for asking. I said my good-byes when I ran away as human. I don’t want to repeat that. She was out of it that time too though. She won’t win any awards for being a mom that a girl could learn from, look up to, or depend on for protection.”

“Sorry, Amberlyn. I won’t patronize you by saying I understand, but I’m truly sorry. I know we’ve never been close – never acted like brother and sister– but if you need anything, you know where to find me.”

She did know where to find him, a house not far from her apartment actually.

“Are you ready to go home?” Kane asked her as he touched her shoulder gently, like she would bite him or yell at him now that they were alone. “You look, truly, like the walking dead right now.” His laugh came out slight, sounded as if he’d meant to test the waters.

“Listen Kane, I’m not mad about what you did. I understand it and I don’t mourn that monster’s life. I’m a bit sad, just no idea about what. Maybe it’s just latent feelings resurfacing from seeing him. And, I’m beyond tired. Seeing him brought up a lot of crappy memories for me.”

“I can only imagine. Let’s get you out of here, okay? I will stay at your place; stand guard. I just have this feeling – one that raises the hair on my neck – that trouble… well, it’s just waiting for us around the next corner. So, let’s get through the woods and home. You have about an hour till daylight.”

A sound of a scuffle in the woods caught their attention – A woman’s scream abruptly cut off.

“My mother?” Amberlyn yelled, though she’d not meant to. “The Vamps were taking her back. They just left.”

They took off on a run into the trees. Amberlyn didn’t even know how she moved her legs since she couldn’t even feel them under her any longer. She seemed to move across the ground at a speed slower then usual for her. Stopping only when she found her mother on the

ground alone, she wondered what had happened to Devin and the other Vampire she had left with. Kane came up to meet her. As a Were – he was fast, but not Vampire fast, not even 'out-of-it slow' Vampire fast.

Leaning over the woman on the ground she noticed her mother's eyes were still open, blinked now rather then the straight stare of previous. Her chest rose and fell at a rapid pace, but just didn't get the height one would expect of a woman who was afraid. Amberlyn's ear close to her mother's mouth let her hear the woman's breaths, which came fast but were shallow. She had to wonder how much longer her mother's body could remain in this unnatural state without any permanent damage.

A bright white light, like a fireball of some kind, moved past Amberlyn's face. She could feel not only the warmth of it, but the electric-buzz it carried snaked down the side of her body. The light became momentarily bigger, causing her to shield her eyes as she fell behind her mother. Another light flashed, but this time her entire body buzzed, as if she had been mildly electrocuted. Then, she was out cold.

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CHAPTER FOUR

The sound of a light whimpering hit her ears as she woke to the feeling of a warm hand that ran over her forehead, her cheek, and then over her hair.

"Kane," Amberlyn croaked out lightly.

"No baby girl, it's me…uhm…it's your mother."

Amberlyn's eyes opened to a tender moment she'd longed for as a child, but had never come during those days. The dream of a mother who paid her some recognition, some love, offered a gentle touch – or lord forbid a fucking hug – had been a futile endeavor to even bother to wish upon back then. So, she'd given up hope long ago. Now, the moment had happened when she'd least expected it, as a grown woman, when she was – of all things – a Vampire. Now the woman chose to act her role? What the hell?

"Why the fuck now?" Amberlyn only realized the words had been said out loud when her mother pulled her hand back like she'd been burned. "Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you."

"Scare me? No, you don't scare me…well…I saw the teeth…I don't know exactly…I just…I just don't want to overstep my place. And, I have no idea what my place is now that my husband no longer rules me. I sat here all day watching you sleep, regretting so much, actually free to feel the regret, to let it almost drown me. I never did right by you. I was weak. He told me all the time that if I stepped in between him and you that he would kill you on the spot; make me live, tied in the basement with your body...his descriptions were far more graphic than that. I was weak. I'm sorry."

She watched her mother's eyes cloud over like they used to, that dead look about them. But Amberlyn said nothing; she had no idea what to say anyway. Her mother was fighting her own demons now, and Amberlyn, despite the woman's words, was holding back now, whatever time of day it was, wherever the hell they were. She braced herself and started frantically looking around as her mother spoke again.

“Even though there were times,” she continued, “that I thought you, me, both of us would be better off dead, I was too weak to do anything about it.”

“Why didn’t you just fucking take me and leave the bastard?” Okay, so she wasn’t so good at keeping her emotions banked at the moment. She wouldn’t chastise herself for it.

“I thought he was right, that my father was right, that I wasn’t good enough for anyone, fit to care for anything. My father actually handed me off to yours, gave me away, a daughter he called a piece of worthless trash, to a man he said could teach me how to act like a proper woman. I went from being beaten by one man to being beaten by another. It was all I knew. I stopped talking. I stopped living really, and I couldn’t afford to let myself love you from the moment you were forcibly conceived. But I did. It was just too hard to bear, and I tried to ignore it as much as I could. My father was right. I’m so sorry, is all I can say.”

Her mother looked around them as if to see if anyone listened, though there was no one else in the room.

“Secretly though,” Amberlyn’s mother whispered, “I’ve wanted to call you my baby girl again for years now. First time I did, right after you were born, touched your tiny face, your thin baby hair, he beat me within an inch of my life. It was two weeks before I could even walk again on my own, till he even let me see you again. He wouldn’t even tell me if you were still alive.” The woman broke down in tears. Amberlyn hated to watch anyone suffer so much.

That concern meshed with her anger and the words spilled from her mouth like they were the only two left in the universe and she didn’t have to care about anything around them. There was just the two of them, a daughter who wanted, and a mother who’d not saved her. “I will never understand why you stayed, how you could have done that to us!”

Her mother scooted back into the corner of the room they were in.

“I’m sorry, don’t be afraid of me,” Amberlyn cried out.

“I’m not. Why would I be afraid of you? Just giving you space. I assume you don’t want my company, let alone my frail excuses. I

thought of it, of trying to escape, but it seemed there was not a way. I was a sick, weak woman. I'm sorry."

Amberlyn didn't know what to say to that. Obviously her mother didn't understand the value of a life, or what seeing her daughter bare her fangs last night meant. Her father had though, and she found some sick amount of pleasure in that fact.

Amberlyn finally sat up all the way, looked around them. The reality of their total situation started to leak into her consciousness. They were in a basement, she guessed, or some back room somewhere. There was a cement floor under her with markings on it, a circle and various other words and diagrams. Wooden shelves of all shapes and sizes held books and all manner of other things – jars, bowls, a skull, you name it.

"Damn Witches!" Amberlyn stood while she looked around. She halfheartedly tried the door and wasn't surprised they had found a way to make it so even a Vampire couldn't open it or break it down.

"Did you say Witches? Is that what all of this is? I've seen stuff like this on TV, but never in real life. I must have misunderstood you."

"Ah, yes, actually, Witches. Wiccan, you know?" Amberlyn figured that was a good cover. The woman didn't need to know that they could actually shoot wounding balls of light from their fingertips any more than she needed to know that Amberlyn drank blood for food. Speaking of which, she was beyond dangerously thirsty now.

"Why are we in here, Amberlyn? A woman came in this afternoon while you slept. I'd asked if something was wrong with you, as I couldn't get you to respond to me at all. She'd said yes, but not to worry, you wouldn't die or anything, it wasn't possible again. Then before I could ask her what her strange words meant, she laughed, loudly, ridiculously, as if she was being tickled to death or something, like she couldn't stop laughing at her own joke. Only, I hadn't heard her tell one. She said you would wake up when the sun went down. She was a strange woman. I guess a Witch. Dressed strangely, but she warned me you were dangerous. Then you asked me not to be afraid of you. Are you dangerous? Should I be afraid of you too?"

"No, you shouldn't. The woman is crazy," Amberlyn grumped. *And*

a dead Witch as soon as I get my hands on her. "Do you remember seeing a man last night or today? His name is Kane."

"No. I was a bit out of it when we were brought in. It was like I was trapped inside myself. It took me a while to believe your father actually gone. Strangely, I still don't feel safe. Why are we here?"

"Well, I don't want to alarm you, but they hate me. They've basically kidnapped and locked us up down here. Didn't you ask the strange lady who was down here earlier why we were here?"

"She didn't give me a chance really."

"Right. Of course she didn't." Amberlyn bit her tongue to avoid saying anything too mean to the woman about once again not having done shit for her.

Amberlyn began banging on the door and on the walls. Then she threw bottles and broke them, as she yelled and demanded her release. She stopped only when she had become angry enough that her fangs started to come out. She turned from her mother to cover them, knowing her eyes would be as dark as night, more like a zombies. Though she'd already noticed how the woman cowered at her displays of rage; she probably compared her to her father. *How do you like those fuckin' rotten apples that don't fall far from the diseased tree?*

Luckily, a few labels on the bottles displayed that the contents were animal blood, so she stuck her head in between the shelving to guzzle them down. It wasn't much, but she hoped enough that she'd stop her thirst for her mother.

She demanded of anyone who might be within hearing range of the room to know what happened to Kane. She'd even screamed, asked what had happened to her brother and the other Vamp from last night that they'd taken her mother from. But the house was silent, as if everyone just slept through her screaming, banging and breaking. She knew it was night, windows or not, or she wouldn't be up.

After what seemed like forever, she slid down the wall, skin off her knuckles, her body shook from her fits of rage. Somehow she prayed to anyone, anything, which would listen to the likes of her, that Kane was safe, as was her brother and all the others in her clan, even the

sincere Witches in Winter's covens. Beyond all hope, she thought that somehow she would be able to feel, if Kane was hurt or worse.

"Your eyes…what's wrong with your eyes, Amberlyn?"

"I'm fine, Mother," she spat out. The name felt foreign to her, like she'd said it because someone told her to call this woman that, but it held no decipherable meaning to her. "Sorry, it's not you I'm mad at. I just need to know if Kane, the man I love, and my people are okay."

"So, you found friends, people to stay with once you ran away, I guess. Have you been happy since you left?" Her mother's voice had cracked on a sob.

"Yes, I did. The first few years after leaving your home were rough, stealing, doing what I had to in order to survive. But later, a man found me when I was in a bad spot. He…well, he changed me, treated me like a daughter should be treated. He taught me about his world, brought me here, took care of me, made me… different. Yes, a different person, one stronger, able to battle and more… and he helped me to exorcise the demons from my past. I was one of the few lucky runaways. Don't know if you ever worried about me, knowing what happens to runaways, my age, my sex. Most of us become prostitutes to survive. Of course, an occasional bad client I knew would have been better than dad was when I left. But again, I was saved from all that. And then I met a man named Kane. I've fallen in love. Only these Witches and others, they say we can't be together." She waved her mother silent when the woman opened her mouth again. "Don't ask. It's really complicated. It's just that my new family and Kane's family don't get along. A real Romeo and Juliet thing."

The idea of it all hit her at that moment, as her own words started to sink in. They were the Romeo and Juliet of the Vampire and Werewolf world. Suddenly amused for a blessed second, it was cut short by her mother's voice.

"Romeo and Juliet?" her mother said softly, like she romanticized it all. She remembered how her mom had watched television when she wasn't working like a slave in the house. She would quietly talk to Amberlyn sometimes about the shows, the same romantic look in her eye, like she dreamed of living the make-believe lives the actors on

the television set did. These weren't conversations mind you, but the closest thing the two of them had ever had together when her father was out.

"Something like that; definitely two warring cl—families. But, he's worth the fight. He is a great man. Strong. Caring. And he loves me, scars and all." She looked daggers at her mother, unable to stop herself. Funny how she never thought of her scars anymore when Kane undressed her. Her father had always made sure her injuries could be hidden. Therefore, unlike her brother Isaac, her scars were hidden underneath her clothes.

"Sorry," the woman whispered.

An uncomfortable silence filled the room. Amberlyn started to pace. Her mother finally fell asleep, so she started to look at the things left on the shelves. This was obviously some kind of meeting room. Large books, some traditionally bound, purchased book on spells, leaned there. The others looked like large scrapbooks. Grimoires she assumed. Drake had taught her about them; these personal journals the Witches kept of the spells they did and other things, and then passed down through the generations. He said if she were to rule the clan she needed to know as much as she could about the other clans in the area. The best leader didn't fall from surprises.

Guilt sliced through her as it hit again her that her surprise had lead to Drake's death. She heard his voice in her head though. Words he'd said before. He told her to be strong, to fight, to be herself and to never look back with regret. At the time he'd been talking to her about her father. She shook her head, ridding herself of the memory and the feelings it brought with it. *Not now. You need to concentrate on getting out of here.*

Taking a grimoire from the shelf, she placed it on the stand in front of her. The thing looked something like a podium that a leader would speak from, only it was draped with a green cloth and flowers and had a few candles and stones along the back of it. Likely an alter for rituals and other spells. She could imagine their high priestess, that nasty Sashia, standing here and leading.

The large tomb was covered in a soft leather cover, the outside

rustic but pretty, decorated with a metal pentagram at the top with some Gaelic or Celtic writing burned into it underneath. She didn't know if the languages were different or the same. Come to think of it, it had always sounded like Drake had used them interchangeably. There was an ache in her chest. She missed the only real father she'd ever had. The fact he was no longer around so she could ask her stupid questions of him deflated her more. It had always been so nice, so unbelievable a thing to be able to ask a man a question, no matter how dumb it, was without fear of some sort of discipline. Usually, from Drake, what she got was a laugh and an explanation.

Focusing back in on the grimoire she opened the old leather bound cover; inside it was all handwritten, some in English, some in another language. The spells she could read and the journal entries about trying them were fascinating. She'd never read anything like them and wished she could sit down in a comfy chair with a cup of coffee and read away for hours. Anything from finding something lost, to binding the evil in a person and banishing it, and everything in between was in there. Some were very personal. A number of them seemed easy. Others were way too complicated for her brain, with many lines of chants she couldn't read and lists of things needed that she had no idea what they were. The animal correspondences, the meaning of herbs and flower and foods, it all simply had her mesmerized.

Secretly she hoped things with Isaac and Winter worked out so that some day she could pick the woman's brain about all this stuff, maybe even borrow a few books, sit in on a spell or two. Oh hell, not only was she a Vampire who would run naked under a full moon with a Werewolf, but now she considered dancing under the tiny ball of light with a Witch too. Pulling her hand back a moment, she wondered whether the book itself held some magic. She could feel the spark of electricity in it when she touched the book to turn the pages and it captured her completely.

Shaking off the energy but leaving the book out, she went back to the shelves and examined the items she hadn't broken. While jars of herbs lay all over the floor and made the room smell like a restaurant and the perfume section of a department store combined, things like

mirrors and scarves and crystals were all still neatly stacked. A few cauldrons and candles of different sizes sat on the shelves, all well preserved, obviously well used, not in any way dusty or neglected. She picked up what looked like a knife with crystals embedded in the handle, only to get a shock almost immediately. The knife hit the floor and made enough noise to wake her mother from the sound sleep she had been snoring through.

The snores hadn't bothered or surprised Amberlyn though. The woman's nose looked like it had been broken multiple times. Her face resembled that of a boxer and a forty-some year old smoker. Once, a long time ago, she'd found a picture of her mother, young, frail, and scared looking, in a box hidden in the back of the woman's underwear drawer. Even then, like now, something told Amberlyn that given a different life, the woman could have been beautiful, maybe even loving and kind. It was sad the world would never know the person she could have been.

Just as her mother started to get her bearings after being so abruptly awakened, yelling from above them broke through Amberlyn's hundredth wayward thought. Feet moved heavy across the ceiling. There was screeching. Doors slammed. A full fight had obviously broken out over their heads.

"What is going on up there," her mother cried out. "It sounds like they are going to come right through the floor."

The woman had sat up now, pressed her back to the wall, in a fetal position with her arms wrapped around her legs.

"I don't know. Maybe someone is here to rescue us. Shush. Let me listen."

With her Vampire hearing, she heard Kane's voice, along with Isaac's, Achim's and Willa's. They threatened the Witches. It must have been a surprise attack. Then she heard Winter say that she had bound the Witches' powers temporarily until they could get Amberlyn and her mother. They'd come for her, and they were all alright. Relief almost made her faint before she felt something like an adrenaline rush kick in.

"Kane! Isaac! Achim! Willa!" she cried out their names and soon

heard footsteps move toward the door.

Several bodies or boots or something hit against it before Winter spoke, “It’s been spelled to stay shut against even Vampire strength boys. Step aside.”

Amberlyn heard a sizzle like a there was some electric key being used. Her mother jumped up, grabbed Amberlyn’s arm as she cowered behind her and whispered in her ear, “Did she say Vampire or have I lost it.”

“They’re all good people. No one will hurt you.”

“I must’ve heard wrong,” her mother shook her head but stayed where she was. Amberlyn stayed behind the podium, unsure what would happen with the door, if it would just open or burst into tiny pieces. She thought amusing how humans doubted their own ears, their own senses even when the paranormal creatures were revealed to them. Guess her mother found Vampires so unbelievable, that even having seen her daughter with fangs she could still come up with some excuse in her mind for why they were there. No wonder they’d all been able to stay a secret so long. What with glamoring and spells and all, the human’s minds could be easily changed, even if they didn’t doubt their own senses. They need never really know.

After all the noise, the door merely swung open like a small child had pushed it. Though the way the crowd of those who loved her stood, no one had touched the damn thing. Kane rushed through it, toward her. She stepped out from behind the podium and forced her mother to let go of her arm.

Kane’s arms pulled her into a breathtaking hug. Soon Isaac and Willa were right there as well, touched her, and asked her if she was okay. Assuring them she was, she turned to Achim who just stared at her. A smile from her dimmed the worry lines around his eyes.

“He’s not worth it, “ Amberlyn told Achim. “A real monster, my human father, the world doesn’t need.” She kissed her grandfather’s cheek then and threw her arms around him when he lifted his head to look at her.

“I love you, my dear Amberlyn,” Achim said as he kissed her cheek.

Me too’s and *Love You’s* were said all around until she noticed her

mother looked overwhelmed, frail as always, as she held white-knuckled onto the podium. The fear the woman felt was evident in her grasp on the stand, but Amberlyn's Vampire senses felt it coming off her in waves. She ignored it.

"Everyone, this is my biological mother, Evelyn." Amberlyn waved toward the woman. Then, she quickly turned back to her clan, "She knows nothing really, remembers little from last night."

Amberlyn shook her head to let them know her mother had no idea what they all were. After introductions were over, Winter suggested they all go quickly.

"My holding sp…uhm, well, my special binds on those special people upstairs may not last very long on some of them who are stronger than me. They will be able to break through them on their own soon. Come on."

"Wait," Amberlyn said as she left Kane's arms. "Winter, I just want to thank you for helping me. You don't know me at all."

"Isaac has told me all I need to know about you. I was happy to help. They are my family, but that doesn't mean I'm like them."

"Truer words have never been spoken." Amberlyn threw her arms around the Witch as she looked at her brother. "I like her, bro."

The smile that lit up Isaac's dark face, one always shadowed by a hood, was priceless. Smiling herself as she laced her fingers with Kane's, she bid her mother to follow them.

"We can all go back to Drake's. I trust Winter and Kane to know where it is," Isaac said as they moved up the stairs. It was a big step for him to offer such a thing. She heard Kane's heart skip a beat at the announcement.

Things had already gotten better, even if only in their private circle. At the moment she had hope for the first time in a long time.

When they got to the place deep in the woods where the cave entrance was, Isaac stopped and turned to Amberlyn.

"What do you want to do with your mother?" Isaac asked. His hand lent his support on her shoulder. "I can only imagine this would be hard for you. If I saw mine again—"

"No," Amberlyn interrupted her brother, "This is different. Yours

was a mother to you when she was given a chance. Let me say goodbye, then glamour her and have them take her away like the original plan."

"Fine. I will call in two Vamps to do so. Take a moment. Kane and I will stay. Sorry, we don't want to leave you alone, the rest, except for Winter, will go in."

Isaac turned to the crowd, grabbed Winter's hand, pulled her to his side, gave her a quick kiss and announced, "Go in. We have a pressing matter to deal with first, then we will join you."

Amberlyn turned to her mother. "Listen…mom. It was nice to see you, and I'm glad things will be better for you now that… uhm, your husband is gone. Where do you want to go? Do you want to go home or do you want to start over somewhere new?"

"I want to stay here with you, Amberlyn. I know you must hate me, but I'd like just a few days."

"I'm sorry mom. There is a war going on here and it's not safe. Pick a place to go, and maybe someday I'll be able to visit you?"

"But, Amberlyn, please…" her mother begged.

Amberlyn looked at the woman's puffy, red eyes. With her ability to make a human do whatever she wanted, she forced her mother to respond to one question at a time. At the same time, she steeled her own heart – or wherever these painful feelings had come from – against anything else her mind could dish up.

"Where is the one place you've always wanted to go?" Amberlyn asked once she had her mother under her control.

"New York," her mother answered in a flat tone, obedient, as Amberlyn knew she would be. She was easy prey. It'd taken very little effort to manipulate the woman's thoughts. "I want to get lost in such a big and busy city. I've always dreamed of being a fashion designer you know?"

No, I didn't. How could I? A bit of hurt and anger welled up inside Amberlyn. If only the woman had had the guts to have taken them there years ago. She would have loved to have the opportunity to get lost in a big and busy city rather then live the way they had. She would have been happier to have slept in a shelter with only a bag of

belongings to her name, one meal a day, whatever, as long as they were away from that man who'd called himself her father.

When she'd left home years ago without a destination, this little town where she ran into a Vampire had not been her first choice either. But now the place felt more like home than any other place ever could have.

Her brother Devin arrived with two Vampires he'd lined up to take Amberlyn's mother to whatever location Amberlyn told them. Watching the woman who gave her life, but then never cared for her, walk away forever, glamoured, forced to say goodbye, the struggle of it was bearable for Amberlyn, but only because she was in Kane's arms. Once again, she closed the door on her past, cursed her father and the bad Witches and turned to lay her head on Kane's chest, the only place she wanted to be.

The moment didn't last long though when she walked into Drake's place deep in the cave. Nothing looked as it once had and all eyes were on her.

"What's going on?" Amberlyn asked cautiously, not able to handle anymore surprises. But, the looks on her families faces told her she better figure out how soon. They all looked like the cat who eaten the canary.

"Well," Willa started in, her voice high, her hands wrung together, "while Kane and Isaac and Achim were out looking for you along with Winter, I had a lot of nervous energy and a great idea, I think. We want you and Isaac to be able to stay in the Willows for now, close to family, but safe and able to freely be with the ones you love. So, I hired a few handy men, had a few Vamps glamour them in and out of here today just to hide the location, to do a bit of construction. Don't worry, I paid them well for their troubles even if they are not aware of them." Willa laughed a giddy little laugh.

"I will apologize right off the bat that the walls are thin though. So sorry." Willa stopped to give an exaggerated wink. "But, these walls were constructed around two double beds to create two separate bedrooms, one for you and Kane and one for Isaac and Winter. That leaves this area for a sort of livingroom. I had blood restocked in the

fridge and food brought in for Winter and Kane. I tried to think of everything you could need, but let me know if I missed something. Now, many in the Willows would think me mad to trap two Vampires in a hidden cave with a Werewolf and a Witch, but I think you guys can work it out. We just love you, Amberlyn and Isaac, and we want you happy until we can figure this whole thing out. And, we trust in your judgment. You are both fine adults who Achim and I are very proud of. We also want you close, as I said and we want your help with the war, in the ways you can help, safely. So, what do you think? Can you live here, rather than some other town in hotel rooms, until we get a handle on this situation?"

"Wow, I don't know what to say?" Amberlyn stuttered, and looked at Isaac for help.

"It is amazing, Willa," Isaac said as he stepped forward and took their grandmother into a huge hug.

"I asked Isaac, just to make sure it was alright before I took his and Winter's little hideaway away from them. They were both more than happy to share this one safe haven we have," Willa added.

"Thank you. All of you. I don't know what to say. Kane?" She turned to him to find him smiling.

"Thank you. I am more than blown away by the show of support. It means everything to us." He kissed Amberlyn's forehead, still smiling from ear to ear, a way he rarely did.

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CHAPTER FIVE

It seemed like forever and a day to Amberlyn, but she finally got those she loved out of the place. Not that she didn't love them back or appreciate them saving her life and all today. She couldn't be more grateful to Willa for having created a safe love nest for her and Kane. It was just the cutest thing to watch her so excited to have done it too. To have a place to live, to be together, well, her mind still tried to process all of that.

After having watched her abusive father die, having said goodbye to the mother who'd never protected her, but suddenly tried to be a mother, and being kidnapped by a bunch of lunatic Witches, she just wanted to fall into Kane's arms and put the world far from her mind. There was something to be said for celebrating life with a good, hard fuck. She intended to use her Werewolf well for that tonight. She had all kind of pent up emotions to get out. She could think of nowhere better to let loose than under her naked Werewolf.

As she stood in the bedroom, Kane's started to immediately run his hands over her body as he kissed her with a renewed passion. His mouth came at hers hard, harsh, demanding, each kiss born of the gut-wrenching thoughts of loss. She knew how he felt all too well.

"Just remember, there, Wolfy," she whispered between kisses when she should have caught her breath for the next one. "Thin walls. We are going to have to be quiet about this. I mean, I know Isaac and Winter are probably in there doing… well, stuff…" she left off, cocked her head to the side wall in a flirtatious way, "But I don't want to hear it. They have to feel the same."

She started to feel light-headed. They kissed, talked, but she truly could have cared less about what her brother was doing as she eased her body into Kane's tight embrace.

"No problem. I can have you quietly. You just remember no screaming when I make you come there, Vampy."

Amberlyn pushed him down onto the bed. She didn't often pit her strength against his. They were fairly evenly matched depending upon

the day on the calendar. Full moons, he took the upper hand, but when she'd just fed, like tonight having indulged in the blood Willa had brought, with the moon only a sliver, she was the tougher of the two. She didn't rub it in though. It didn't bode well for the alpha in Kane and she would do nothing to ever diminish him in any way. She wanted to build him up, to show him all he was to her and all he could be on his own.

Right now, she just wanted to get him so excited that he would take her rough, almost ruthless. She wanted him to thrust in and out of her until their bodies melted into one rush of passion. She needed that, needed him.

The wolf's eyes behind the human form made Kane's green eyes glow a golden-brightness. He laid back on the bed in a sexy sprawl, his legs spread apart. His erection showed through his jeans and tightened the denim over the long bulge. A fire coiled through her stomach, made her wet and ready, and burned away any lingering inhibitions. He found her beautiful, scars and all, but still, she turned down the lights, lit a candle and stood before Kane.

Their eyes caught. She felt him focus in on her, his lusting looks like unyielding caresses. With her finger over her lips to remind him to not say anything, she started to wiggle her body like a snake for her charmer. Slowly, she lifted off her top; let the thin lacey tank sweater she had on fall into Kane's lap. He pulled the material up to his nose, sniffed and growled; a low rumble in his chest meant for only her ears. By now she was used to him sniffing everything.

A shiver went through her, made her hotter rather than cold. She played with her lace-covered breasts, ran her finger lightly over them, thrilled in the correlation between the brush of her fingers over her own nipples and the tightening of the muscles low in her belly.

"Are you wet?" he mouthed.

Walking up to the bed, she placed her hands on his wrists. It was a quick motion, one at Vampire speed to keep him off guard. Once she had him pinned to the bed, his chest rising and falling, turned on by her actions, she leaned over and whispered in his ear, "Maybe soon I will let you check."

She danced away, pulling out her best belly dancing, hip shaking moves. She did not even care, if she could dance or not, because she loved the feeling she got from knowing he watched her, wanted her. With an excruciating slow pace, she peeled the bra from her flesh, bared her white skin and pinkish nipples. They were hard, erect and she played with them until he moaned aloud.

She placed a finger to her lips again to quiet him. Only, she was the one who held back her own giggle when she let her hands run between her breasts then down her stomach, which had made him clap his hands over his mouth. Unbuttoning her jeans, she danced out of them too. Her underwear she lost next. Watching her rubbing herself, over her mound, between her legs, her fingers feeling her wetness, her own hot arousal, Kane bit at her shirt.

When she turned her back to him, bent over and spread her thighs wide, he lunged for her. His hands firmly clamped on her hips, he pulled her ass back against his denim-covered cock. She had to put her hands over her own mouth to stifle the noise of her own excitement at being handled in such a way. Standing up but still falling back, her legs pressed against his, trying for some sort of stability, she finally let go. Her head fell back on his shoulder. His stubble scrapped her cheek. His hands found her breasts and squeezed them tight. With her legs open, she felt deliciously wanton; wanted to only be Kane's meal.

His warm breath in her ear sent goosebumps down her body.

Then he whispered, "I love you Amberlyn. I don't care what you are, how we have to be together, what anyone else thinks of us… I love you. I want to be with you forever, just like this, naked, open, in love so that nothing else matters."

His hand shot down between her thighs then, cupped her sex; he moved his fingers to roam inside her. Each push of his hand took him deeper.,

She ground her ass against his erection. The jean material created a wonderful scathing friction. She turned her head to bite and kiss his neck.

Amberlyn took in his scent, his spicy cologne mixed with the strong, musky smell of the skin of one half human and the other half

animal. She knew his earthy taste, one of salt and something not namable, but distinctly him. It aroused something primal in her.

Moving her hips, taking his fingers inside her greedily, she reached back between their bodies to undo his jeans, tug them and his boxers down enough to let his cock spring out against her ass. Letting it fall between her cheeks, she rode his fingers as he groaned and pulled her to him tighter.

Suddenly, he moved them while he kept her body tucked under his. Holding her against the bed, he kissed her neck, her back, with branding kisses. The short hair on his mouth and chin created a burn as his teeth marked her flesh. Soon his mouth traveled down her back, over her ass, then gave her puckered hole a lick before he grabbed her thighs hard and spread her legs wider.

She buried her face in the mattress, not able to hold back a squeal as his finger fell from her. But his tongue replaced them, poked at her opening, lapped up her juices.

Turning her to face him, he pulled her legs out from under her and placed them around his hips. Her hips bucked, wanted him, needed the thickness, the length of his erection inside of her. But, he remained solid, like a rock as he looked at her as if mesmerized.

The candlelight shone, highlighted what the sun had lightened of his hair. His eyes held the intense glow of his wolf, which further illuminated her own animalistic needs. His need for her was poised to enter her depths. She waited as she held her breath.

“Amberlyn,” he sighed her name as the tip of his penis pressed against her moist opening a little more.

“Kane,” she whispered and he pushed into her.

Their breath caught simultaneously. He pushed in and out in time with the rhythm of his accelerated heartbeat, which she could hear as clear as if it was music playing in her ear. She pulled his chest down onto her own so that the beat of his heart felt like it was hers. It didn’t take long until they climaxed together; their muscles clenched and their limbs shook for what seemed like a glorious eternity.

Spent, Kane’s full weight collapsed onto her. He nuzzled into her neck, his hot panting like a trophy to her.

***

Amberlyn's phone started to ring just as her and Kane had cuddled under the blanket and into each other's bodies to sleep.

"You never know. I better get it," Amberlyn sighed as she stretched to the floor without getting out of bed. Kane held around her stomach as she reached to catch the leg of her jeans with her fingertips. She was finally was able to pull them to her and get her phone from the pocket. "It's Devin?" she questioned no one in particular.

"Hello, Devin. Is everything okay? My mother?" Amberlyn finally answered.

"No, your mother got off just fine. I saw her off with my friends. They had a solid itinerary to get her to New York, layovers for sleep, re-glamoring schedule, food and all. They'll be fine. Don't worry about your Mother.

Amberlyn listen though, I'm sorry to catch you right before you go to sleep, but I couldn't wait until night fell again. I need to talk to you. I need someone to confess to that I hope will understand what I've done. Please, after day sleep, can we meet as soon as night falls? I can come to you. We could talk right outside the cave," Devin rambled on at a fast clip.

"Don't tell me you are in love with a Werewolf or a Witch too?"

"Worse."

"Worse?" Amberlyn laughed into the phone, a bit louder than she'd meant to. "What could be worse?" She sat up in the bed now, conscious of how Kane still held onto her, the tension in the muscles of his arms showed his own fears at what was going on now.

"I'm in love with a woman…a human," Devin whispered.

"Shit." Amberlyn said, though it came out soft as she turned to look at Kane. She knew he'd heard what Devin had said.

"I know. Please, will you talk to me? I'm scared. I was ignoring it, denying it. But, tonight on my way back from dropping off your mother, I found her in trouble. She's here at my place. Unconscious, but soon to wake I'm sure. I know that sounds bad, but I had no

choice. I won't hurt her. But, I love her. I'm a fucking Vampire and I'm scared of having my dead heart broken. I don't know what to do! I don't know how she's going to react come tomorrow night."

"Does she know what you are, Devin?" Amberlyn asked and heard Kane take the same deep breath she did as they waited for the answer.

"Yes, yes she does...now."

"Have you…ah, you know…"

"No. It's not like that yet. Shit, I mean, I've been with humans, but I didn't care about them. What if it's too much for me? Her blood. What if I accidentally killed her and broke my own heart. No, I can't think of that now. We are not that far I don't think. Did you hear me though? I kidnapped her. She had a fight with her brothers and she ran away and got hurt. I was eavesdropping. I couldn't leave her there bleeding with Vampires out. So, I had to take her. Please, I don't know what to do now. And, even without a definite leader, who knows who would take vigilante justice on me for revealing us."

"Don't worry, Devin. What the hell am I saying? Worry, but come over when night falls again, as soon as you can get away. We are kind of in hiding here, so just call when you are on your way. We will all work through this."

As she clicked the phone closed there was a knock on her door.

"Come in Isaac," Amberlyn said. She knew that with his hearing, he already knew everything.

"Problem?" Isaac said when he popped his head in the door. "I heard the phone ring."

"The war. It just went up a notch."

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Ever since she was young, *Kiki Howell* has loved to listen to a well-woven tale with real characters, inspired plots, and delightful resolutions. Kiki could spend hours lost in a book, and soon she knew that creating lives, loves, and losses with just words had to be the greatest thing that she could do.

Kiki has had over fifty stories published with three novels hitting Amazon Bestsellers lists in categories like Paranormal, Suspense, Occult Horror and Witch & Wizard Thrillers. She's won awards like being chosen as an Ohioana Book Festival author along with having several shorts win writing contests.

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Blue Moon House: Kitten by Angelica Dawson

How does a twentieth century woman take back control over her own body? By giving that control to the right man.

What if you could have limitless sexual pleasure, at the price of your own blood?

Where does the girl who has done it all go when she wants something new?

Jocelyn considers herself sexually experienced, a leader and manipulator. She is looking for the next challenge. The rumors surrounding Blue Moon House sound like just the thing she's looking for. Losing her roommate to marriage, she also needs a new place to stay. Hoping to find both in the same entity, she follows the rumors to their source and finds much more than she bargained for, beginning with a discovery that defies her biological science background – vampires.

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Blue Moon House - Kitten by Angelica Dawson
Jocelyn's Story
eISBN: 978-1-927415-70-2
First Edition 2013
Edited by Cynthia Boudreaux
Published by Naughty Nights Press
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Blue Moon House: Kitten Jocelyn’s Story by Angelica Dawson

CHAPTER ONE – THE HOUSE

Jocelyn held her breath as she lifted the heavy brass knocker. The house didn't look so different from the others on Baker Street. It was old, probably from 1800, and big, but all the houses in this neighborhood were huge. Whoever ran Blue Moon House had money, probably from the old world. She supposed that made them eccentric instead of perverted.

No, if half of what she heard was true, they were perverted. But then again, so was she. That's why she was here. An orgy with two of her professors and four of her friends had been a fantastic pinnacle, but she was at the end of her ideas. Jocelyn wanted to know what Blue Moon House could show her. She had been told even the most experienced would find novelty here.

When the door opened, a young woman with shining black hair and the most striking blue eyes Jocelyn had ever seen peered at her, as Jocelyn would at a specimen in the lab. The color of her eyes didn't look natural. Nothing she'd learned in her six years of biology could explain them. The woman's satin dressing robe was closed, but left little to Jocelyn's imagination as to what was beneath it.

“Yes? Are you sure you have the right house?” The woman spoke with a slight accent — Spanish or Italian, Jocelyn couldn't say. However, she knew she wanted inside.

“I believe I do. May I come in?”

Those brilliant eyes looked over Jocelyn slowly, starting at her crown and moving down over her spring duster to her buttoned boots. Once again, Jocelyn felt like a subject under scrutiny.

“Take off your coat for me,” the woman demanded.

Jocelyn looked over her shoulder, but didn't see any reason not to comply. The evening was warmer than average, though without the sun, it would cool. She pulled off the linen and folded it over her arm, revealing her modern dress beneath, her puffed sleeves very slightly crushed by the dust coat. However, the stripes pointed toward her waist and her hips tilted back from habit, following the curve of her corset. Although she'd left off her bustle today, her corset did a fine job of emphasizing her hips and bosom. The woman's eyes lingered on Jocelyn's breasts where they were pushed up over the bodice.

“You are sure?” The woman asked again, narrowing her eyes. Perhaps she hadn't passed scrutiny?

Jocelyn licked her lips and looked over the woman's hips and breasts again before meeting her eyes. “I'm positive.”

“My name is Sophia. Follow me, please.”

Sophia led Jocelyn to a parlor. On the other side, Jocelyn could hear some of the sounds she had expected. Shrieks and cries came from a hall lined with doors. There were others though. A cracking noise accompanied by an actual scream of pain made Jocelyn jump. Sophia indicated a chair for Jocelyn and moved to a writing desk in the corner, opening it and pulling out paper and pen.

“I shall have to find out who is spreading rumors of us. It is forbidden to speak of this place to those outside. Would you be willing to tell me who told you about us?” Sophia arched an eyebrow, regarding Jocelyn as she wrote.

“I would tell you, but I couldn't. It wasn't one person,” Jocelyn admitted. “I have...asked a number of people where to go next.” Jocelyn blushed at her tripping tongue. She didn't normally get embarrassed about sex. Taking another breath, she collected herself. “I've had many partners since coming to the University and we have done many things. When I asked if they'd tried anything else, Blue Moon House tended to come up. They do this in Blue Moon House. Or, I've heard that is done at Blue Moon House. I couldn't help but try to find you.”

“What is your full name, and how *did* you find us?” Sophia asked.

Jocelyn looked at her shoes briefly. “Jocelyn Mary Turner, and I followed someone.”

“Ah,” Sophia sighed.

“Mistress? Is there anything I can do for you?”

Jocelyn's mouth snapped shut as a naked man entered the parlor. His skin was a lovely olive shade and glistened very slightly in the lamplight, as though he'd been sweating. He didn't cover himself at all, giving Jocelyn a perfect line of sight to his manhood hanging between his legs. She smiled when it twitched and lengthened slightly.

“Howard!” Sophia snapped. “Did I give you permission to leave your room?”

“No, mistress,” he admitted, hanging his head.

Sophia scratched a few more words onto the paper. “Return. I will be there shortly.” She waited until Howard had left before handing the paper to Jocelyn. “If you would return here, you must agree to these terms. Also, I need to know whom you followed.”

Jocelyn looked up from scanning the page. “It...it was Beverly Hargrave.”

Sophia nodded. “Did she tell you she comes here?”

“No, but the same rumors mentioned her.”

Sophia sighed and smiled slightly. “Only rumors then, and one very curious kitten who followed them.” Sophia leaned forward and kissed Jocelyn's lips, touching her tongue lightly to them. “I hope to see you again.”

“I'm sure you will,” Jocelyn answered, watching Sophia's hips sway as she walked down the hall. She turned her attention back to the paper.

It was a contract. It required her silence on all matters regarding Blue Moon House. That was easy to agree to. Most of the people who mentioned the place spoke as though it were a fairy tale. None of her friends believed the rumors.

The next clause required her to attend the house for two days out of every week, to be determined. That was simple enough. There were no classes on Saturday or Sunday, the days she most often indulged on her own.

Finally, she must agree to obey any resident of the House implicitly. She should treat the other guests as equals, but the residents as superior. Their every command would be obeyed with alacrity.

That seemed an odd requirement. Jocelyn didn't really understand it. Her professors had been her superiors, arrogant men who believed a woman was worth nothing off the sheets of a bed, and she had reduced all of them to tears, begging her to return to them. All their superiority meant nothing once the clothes came off.

She thought about it for another few minutes, heard a few other disconcerting noises, like slapping or smacking, and then made her decision. She wanted whatever they had here. Taking the pen from the writing desk, she signed her name and added a post-script.

I will be here Saturday morning.

Leaving the paper and fighting the urge to wander down the hall, Jocelyn left Blue Moon House, knowing she would be back.

She returned to her apartment over the florist shop and opened the door to a familiar sight. Her roommate, Daisy, lay on the floor with her beau, Bernard. *Fiancé*, Jocelyn reminded herself; they were engaged now. Not that they hadn't been fucking nightly in the apartment for months.

Daisy sat astride Bernard's hips and bucked furiously, her fingers digging into his shoulders. His eyes rolled back and he cussed. Daisy's smile was triumphant when she eventually turned to Jocelyn.

“So? Was it there?” She rolled away enough to grab Bernard his pipe and herself a cigarette. She lit hers and passed the match to him. Then they both braced their backs on the settee and pulled the knitted throw from it across their laps.

Jocelyn admired Daisy's breasts as they heaved. She was still flush, too, pink covering her exposed breasts and slender neck. Bernard's face was red, but not nearly as attractive with a rather large nose and rough complexion. Daisy was infinitely fairer despite her dark chestnut hair. Jocelyn imagined tangling her fingers in it and pulling Daisy's plump lips to hers.

“Jocelyn?”

She blinked and looked up again. “Yes. Yes, it was there. I'm going back on Saturday.” She dropped the duster she'd never donned again on the settee and started pulling at the laces at her back. “Until then...”

Bernard growled and rounded Jocelyn to speed her disrobing. Of course, he took a moment to fondle her over the top of the corset. Daisy smacked his hand away to take one nipple in her mouth.

Bernard wasn't unwelcome, but Jocelyn preferred her time alone with Daisy. Their engagement was one of the final pushes Jocelyn needed to actually search out Blue Moon House. When her roommate married, she would both need a new place to stay, and a new friend. Perhaps the next would be a man again. She'd long since learned how to abort pregnancies, saving Daisy the shame of admitting Bernard had spoiled the goods once already. Her acceptance at the university was too tenuous to let something as inconvenient as a pregnancy stop her. She would never be a doctor, but she would learn all she needed to research disease and treatments. She would know everything she could about her body and how it worked. She longed to know how far she could push herself before damage was done. What damage could be repaired was also among her fascinations and studies.

Lying down, her head fell between Daisy's thighs, giving Jocelyn a superb view of the engorged pink skin that was still recovering from her play earlier. She began to lick along the dark pink skin while Bernard, hands holding Jocelyn's thighs, thrust into her. If she held her tongue out while he thrust...

“Christ,” Daisy cursed as Jocelyn's tongue moved with her, then pressed downward when Jocelyn flicked into her. “God, Jocy.”

“You sound amazing, doll,” Bernard murmured, leaning over Jocelyn to kiss his bride-to-be. “We'll still do this when we're hitched, right?”

Jocelyn froze, pulling her tongue back into her mouth. Daisy stopped, too, regarding Bernard with a frown creasing her brow.

“Right?”

“No,” Jocelyn said clearly. “This doesn't leave this apartment. When you have a house of your own, it will be yours.” She looked between

the two of them. “I can visit, but I can't stay there. What would your families say?”

Daisy brushed Jocelyn's cheek. She'd hesitated on accepting Bernard's proposal for the sake of her friend, but Jocelyn had understood the opportunity. It would be so easy for the pair to turn something tawdry into something legitimate, something with permanence. She wanted that for her friend, just not for herself. She would miss Daisy, just as she missed Beryl and Jacob and Jed and...She'd said goodbye to a lot of friends over the years. Jocelyn wasn't afraid of being alone. She had an endless list of acquaintances to tap for new friendships. She was a little worried about keeping the apartment by herself. Fortunately, she had all summer to find a new place or someone new to share this one.

After effectively killing the mood, Daisy hustled Bernard out. Then she came and pulled Jocelyn up on the settee atop her, running her fingers over Jocelyn's pale skin. She brushed Jocelyn's blond hair back from her shoulders to kiss one. “Are you going to tell me any more?” she asked, kissing her way down Jocelyn's back while her fingers traced lines along ribs and belly.

“I can't,” Jocelyn admitted, turning to kiss Daisy and play her fingers across the other woman's chest. “Apparently no one in Blue Moon House is supposed to let anyone outside know about it. I was sworn to secrecy today.”

Daisy let out a sigh of disappointment and pouted prettily. Jocelyn sucked the puffy pink lip into her mouth and grazed her teeth over it, sawing her legs between Daisy's.

“I met one beautiful woman and saw a fine male specimen as well.”

Daisy laughed. “Do you ever think of us as more than specimens?”

It was Jocelyn's turn to pout. “You think I don't care about you?”

Daisy smiled and rubbed her nose along Jocelyn's. At the same time she shifted her legs so that their pubic bones touched. “I didn't mean that. I know you care, but you still look at me and see bones and veins and...” Daisy's face turned sour and she shuddered. That movement rubbed along Jocelyn, her breasts and legs. She groaned very quietly.

“Yes, I do still see all those things. I see breasts where the nerves

end right here." She sucked one of Daisy's dark nipples into her mouth, biting down lightly. "I know there are pockets of nerve endings all along here." She ran her fingertips down Daisy's spine making her arch and gasp. "And we both feel fantastical sensations here." She shifted her weight, leaning off the settee and back to the other side so that her groin and Daisy's met completely. She pulled apart the labia, rubbing herself against her friend, feeling how wet they both still were, how hot it made her.

Eventually they made their ways to separate beds. Jocelyn was looking forward to Saturday. All night she was unable to get Sophia's eyes out of her head. The woman was positively sinful with her perfect hourglass figure, even without the aid of corset, and her long pale legs. Jocelyn's hand slid down her torso, imagining Sophia's delicate hand with the pen, her long dark hair falling around their faces.

Jocelyn brushed her sex while imagining Sophia's brilliant blue eyes fixed on her own. She pictured the other woman's breasts rubbing against hers, just as Jocelyn's hand did now. Not quite climaxing, Jocelyn took the frustrated feeling with her as she dreamed of trying to bring Sophia to that same edge, over and over again.

Saturday couldn't come fast enough.

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CHAPTER TWO – TERRANCE AND WILL

Feeling a little exposed without her corset, Jocelyn knocked on the door. It opened immediately, before the knocker had even landed. Taking a step back in surprise, she regarded the man waiting for her. He was very pale, with white blonde hair and the clearest blue eyes she'd ever seen. They seemed to sparkle in an unnatural way. His shirt hung open, revealing a hairless chest. Jocelyn was still admiring it when he spoke.

“You need not knock when you are expected,” he told her. “Follow me.”

“Who are you?”

His hand landed lightly on her cheek. Despite the blow being gentle, it *was* a blow. Jocelyn's expression hardened as her hand flew to her cheek, planning to give this man more than a few words.

“I am your master. You will not make demands of me.”

Jocelyn continued to hold her cheek, ready to stand up for herself. Remembering a clause of the contract, she closed her eyes and sighed. Obey with alacrity. She hadn't expected corporal enforcement of the document, but he wasn't cruel.

“My apologies, sir.” She hesitated on the address, unsure what to call him.

His frown melted. “Sir. I think I like that. Enough of Master for a while. Follow me, Jocelyn. I will show you to your room. In future, when you arrive, head directly there and remove your clothing.”

“Yes, sir,” she agreed quickly. Now things were starting to sound like what she had come to expect.

“This is your room,” he told her, opening a door much like any of the others. “My name is Terrance, but as long as you wear this,” he produced a band of woven gold, a choker, from one pocket of his trousers. He stepped around her to fasten it. “As long as you wear this collar,” he murmured, lips tantalizingly close to her skin, “you will

never use my name."

"Of course, sir." Jocelyn had played this game with a number of professors. They started, adamant that she address them properly, and eventually bowed to her whims. In the end, they all danced to her tune. She expected Terrance would be the same. It was just a matter of patience.

Jocelyn was surprised how many doors ran along the hall. She hadn't spared them more than a glance as they kept a quick pace. She regarded the simple room, hung with thick curtains, likely to muffle sound. She noticed the cries that had permeated on her first visit were muted.

The foot posts of the bed were shorter and from one hung a silk robe similar to the one Sophia had worn. Terrance removed it and held it to her cheek. "This is what you may wear when you are here."

"It is beautiful, sir," she started, but Terrance spoke over her.

"For the moment, however, you will wear nothing." He licked his lips, watching her intently. She felt exposed again, a certain anxiety that wasn't unpleasant. An impatience.

"As you wish," she replied, unbuttoning the front of her dress. She tried to appear at ease, to roll shoulder or hip to make the act more sensual.

Terrance leaned on a bed post and watched, eager. His loose pants displayed his appreciation. Jocelyn let her dress fall to the floor, naked to the waist. Her stockings and belt were still in place. Terrance pushed off the bedpost and turned her away from him, rubbing his hard length into her from behind.

"One more thing," he whispered into her ear. "Release your hair."

Jocelyn sighed and began pulling pins, letting her curls fall around her shoulders. She laughed as she turned, working her fingers through it. She hated pinning it up and back, hated hiding it under a hat. She knew her golden locks were one of her best features and most of her lovers had enjoyed touching them.

"You look uncomfortable," she suggested, her fingers playing with the waist of his pants. "You should take those off."

"You will take them off," he answered. Her nose nuzzled under his

chin as she let the coarse material fall to the floor around his bare feet.

His penis still bobbed lightly, not fully hardened. She stroked it once, feeling the change beneath her fingers — blood filling vessels, muscles tightening, tendons pulling. It all worked in concert to pull his genitalia up. It filled her hand, soft, but not as warm as she had expected. She frowned a little.

“Are you cold?” she asked.

He sighed in pleasure. “Not even a little. Would you mind taking care of this as well?” he asked, plucking at his shirt.

Jocelyn grinned and began removing it, kissing down his bare chest. That was a novelty for her. All the men she'd been with had hairy chests. She liked this. She cupped his sack and gently massaged the pair of balls while continuing to kiss his abdomen. The shirt caught on his wrists, but he tugged it free. He curled his hands into her hair and pushed her lower.

She paused, not eager to take him in her mouth. It brought back bad memories. She loved the taste of another woman, but found semen disgusting. When he didn't release his hold, she wondered if she should tell him.

“Forget it. I don't want your mouth anyway,” he finally said, pulling her by hair and hip to toss her on the bed behind him.

She nearly screamed. The tug on her hair hadn't been painful, but the roots in that section ached and her hip felt bruised. How hard had he gripped it? She looked down, but her stocking belt covered the spot.

Terrance growled as he lunged atop her. Her stockings were still in place when he pushed her leg aside to make room for him.

“Trust me,” he whispered. “We can't contract trust, but it is the most important thing you can give me.” Then he growled again, and violently pushed her back into the bed.

Her vision swam with red. Memories smothered her. Angry hands, belts with buckles that tore and stung, a thick rod of flesh being rammed into her. Told she was worthless, a useless girl. Told she could never be equal to a man. Proving they were superior, superior

torturers, by holding her chin open as they thrust into her mouth. Burning as they violated her anally.

“No! Stop! I can't!”

Terrance did stop, backing up. “Those words could easily be part of the play. This is why we need to trust each other.”

“Play?” she asked, her voice high and still frightened. She was still caught in the memory of her rape. “There is nothing playful about-”

“There is here,” he tried to explain, putting a finger to her lips. “Some women, and men, enjoy the idea of being out of their own control and under someone else's. There is a freedom in it.”

Jocelyn's forehead continued to crease, still not comprehending.

Terrance sighed and lay beside her, his member drooped a little and he looked at her without longing. She continued to sit, though she started removing her stockings.

“You've heard of the Marquis de Sade?”

“Sadism?” she asked, surprised. She had learned of it, but surely that was only for the mentally damaged.

He nodded. “Some people can find heightened pleasure in pain.”

She paused in the process of rolling down the silk. “It has been shown that the centers for pain and pleasure in the brain are very close,” she mused, remembering the diagrams. “Still, there must be something wrong for a person to confuse–”

“You're a scientist,” he said with a smile, interrupting her train of thought. “We've never had a scientist here.”

“Never?” she asked in surprise.

Terrance shook his head. “Most of our guests are business people of one sort or another.”

“Those who can pay,” she surmised. “I hope you aren't expecting-”

Again he interrupted. “What? No! We don't charge money. No, it is merely...I'm not sure why.” He chuckled. “How strange.”

“Well, I might be willing to be...hurt, but I won't be raped again.” She stood and threw her stockings toward the wardrobe. “If that's what you do here, I might as well get dressed.” She bent to pick up her discarded dress, intending on putting it and her stockings in the wardrobe.

Terrance's hand was over hers, taking the article and placing it on the hanger. There were a variety of instruments, pieces of leather and rope inside. He closed it again quickly. “Forgive me. If I had known, I wouldn't have approached you that way.”

Jocelyn nodded. “You might also know that I don't like the taste of semen.” She stuck out her tongue. “It makes me gag.”

Terrance laughed openly at this. “That's why you were reluctant. Normally, we get to know our visitors before they come here, their pasts, their experience. Instead, I think I'd like to get to know you one encounter at a time.”

Jocelyn smiled and moved to grab the robe, which had been replaced on the bedpost. Terrance, with a speed she couldn't quite believe, took her hand from the silk. He pulled it across her chest, and her with it, pressing her back against him. His length, hard again, pressed against her bare bottom. The embrace did not feel violent, and so the proximity to the point that had given her such pain, did not trouble her. He felt good, nestled close.

“Very well, Jocelyn, let's try something else.” He reached down with one hand, over her pubic bone and into the folds of skin between her legs.

He brushed lightly, barely touching her clitoris. She rose on her toes, but his hand moved, sliding not through the crease but over and dipping into her. She reached her hand around his neck to bury her fingers in his hair. His mouth came down on her neck and shoulder, kissing and nibbling, which set her nerves on fire. She could feel the dampness growing between her legs, but still he kept his fingers light, teasing.

“More, please. Rub me.”

“No,” he whispered, breath tickling her ear. He slid his hand out and traced along the inside of her thigh. Then he lifted his hand, brought it around, and traced along the seam of her backside. She groaned.

“Your education didn't cover this?” he asked. His teeth grazed her earlobe.

She shivered and admitted, “I've only felt pain there.” Her knees

shook as he continued to tease with his finger. She tightened her grip on his hair.

“Then allow me to show you.” He placed both his hands beneath her and drew her wetness out in both directions. She burned along the front and tingled along the back. He was pressing so hard against her and as he circled her clitoris again, she gasped and pulled on his hair. She relaxed, reflexively and felt the tip of his finger enter her from behind. She closed her eyes, expecting a piercing pain.

He didn't move, holding his hands still although he continued to kiss and peck. It gave her time to relax. Once she did, she realized how tense she'd become when he entered her. Now he moved the finger slowly, pulling out of her smoothly. She leaned forward slightly, relieved to have felt only pleasure, no pain.

“You liked that?” he asked, leaning over her. “Think you might like this one day?” He rubbed the tip of himself against her hole and she licked her lips.

“No!” she shouted, twisting away.

Terrance's square jaw tightened. “They hurt you there. I wish I could...I will not hurt you,” he promised. “Not until you want pain. I won't have you remembering them when I'm with you. Can you trust me?”

Jocelyn shook for a moment, still overcome with the strange stimulation. She stepped closer, resting her hand on his chest. “I obey.”

“That is a sign of trust,” he said with a smile. Sliding his hand down her side, he slid it between them and put two fingers into her. Keeping them inside, he walked backward, taking Jocelyn with him. At the bed, he picked her up by the waist, plopping her on the mattress.

“You need another word, one that means you need me to stop. One that means pain and not pleasure. Can you choose one?”

“Ow doesn't suffice?” she asked.

“No,” he replied, stepping between her legs and rubbing his hand along her crotch. “It doesn't. Any others.”

“Jesus,” she muttered. He'd gotten her so hot already.

Terrance chuckled. “No, we've found that doesn't work well. Any

other suggestions? Something that you think of when you are in pain."

"Belt buckles," she blurted, touching the scar on her leg.

"Buckles it is." Then he began rubbing her again and she fell back onto the mattress.

With two fingers inside, he used his thumb to tease her already sensitive clitoris. She felt the flush building. As he crooked his fingers inside her, she lifted her head from the bed, bearing down on him, climaxing. She fell back, the blood rushing through her as though someone had pulled a stopper holding it in. She shuddered when he rubbed her clitoris. He did it again, making her twitch and pull her legs away.

Terrance held tightly to one thigh and continued to move his fingers over her. She struggled, but couldn't escape his hold. The tension built into a second climax. She gasped, filling her lungs as quickly as she could, sensing what he would do next.

He didn't touch her over-stimulated clitoris, thankfully, but he did curl his fingers in and out of her. Jocelyn groaned and bucked, rocking with his hand. Then she outpaced it, her hips hammering against the bed. She screamed with the release, her throat rasping with it.

Her head barely hit the mattress when he started touching her again.

"No! Stop! It's too much," she begged, still trying to wriggle away from him. His fingers dug into her leg, holding her steady. "Please!" she begged, the pleasure definitely approaching pain. "Buckles," she whimpered, her leg aching from his grip.

He let go and stepped back. He clicked his tongue, looking at her leg. He left the room for a moment and returned with a bottle. "This should help with the bruises." He poured clear liquid onto a rag and Jocelyn recognized the smell of witch hazel.

"Yes, thank you." She had to clear her throat twice. She hadn't screamed that hard since...in a very long time.

"Did I hurt you?" he asked, holding the rag in place.

"Not beyond the bruises. Would you have kept going?"

Terrance smiled smugly. "What do you think?"

She shivered, glad she'd remembered the word. “So...my anus, you-”

“Anus? You are a scientist. A biologist? Turn over,” he instructed, tugging her shoulder.

Jocelyn rolled onto her belly, her legs hanging off the bed. Terrance ran his fingers over her again, making her kick, but he pulled his hands up, spreading her wetness.

“We'll do this one finger at a time,” he promised, pushing the first one in.

“Ow! That hurts!” she complained. The tingling from before had turned into the burning she remembered.

“How badly?” he moved his fingers slightly and Jocelyn cried out.

“Ow! Buckles! Don't do that!”

Terrance pulled his fingers free and stepped back from her. “My apologies.” She looked over her shoulder, but he didn't move, standing to the side.

“A new woman? My turn, Terrance.” The speaker was behind him. Terrance blocked her view of the door.

Terrance leaned low over Jocelyn and spoke into her ear. “Jocelyn, because you didn't come to us in the usual way, we're still trying to determine who is best suited to you. Are you able to stay the night?”

“There is no need to ask,” the man said. “She must obey.”

Jocelyn already didn't like this man. He was forceful, just like the professors she dallied with only long enough to make them weep her name. She'd idly thought about bending Terrance to her, but she would happily break this man if she could.

“His name is Will,” Terrance whispered into Jocelyn's ear. “Her word is buckles,” Terrance told Will, rising and stepping away from Jocelyn.

“Let's see you, woman.”

Jocelyn started to push herself up, but the man came behind her, reaching around and taking each of her breasts into one hand. Then he pulled her back onto him, thrusting upward and pinching her lower back. As soon as she was pinned, he took her hair and pulled her head back so she stared at the ceiling. This made the pinch in her back

worse, but it also shortened her canal, making this man's length seem that much longer. Not only long, he was thick, and she'd only been teased by Terrance's fingers. Unlike her anus, her vagina stretched without pain. She was completely stuffed with his penis and it pressed into her cervix while her weight pulled her down on him. The pain wasn't severe, but it definitely hurt. As he held her, impaled on him, he seemed to twitch inside her. That had an unexpected effect. Despite the pain, she was now tested by the pleasure coming from the walls of her vagina. It made her squirm to feel more, to alleviate the pain.

She whined and tried ducking her head, still so sensitive everywhere. His hold on her hair didn't lessen.

“Do you like that, whore? Like having a fat cock inside you?” He bent her slightly so her hips braced on the edge of the bed. Her back was still arched, her breasts barely touching the sheets.

“I'm not a whore,” she started to say.

“You are what I say you are,” he told her, beginning his own series of thrusts. As her breasts swayed, her nipples rubbed against the sheets, sending another series of sensations to add to full, twitching, and pinched. Jocelyn writhed but couldn't break free. He didn't let go and she altered her squirming, trying to catch him off guard. He wasn't hurting her, but she didn't like the way he restrained her. The more she moved, the harder and larger he seemed to become. That only made her struggles stronger. When she felt another series of throbs inside her, Will let her go.

Jocelyn turned to really look at the dark man behind her. She covered her mouth in shock when she got her first glimpse of his black skin, his short curly hair and his obsidian-like black eyes. There was something very strange about these people and their eyes.

“What? Who do you think you are, woman?” he asked, reaching for her hair.

“No, it's not...I've never...” She couldn't finish the sentence without digging a bigger hole for herself.

Will snorted with derision, wrapping her hair in his hand one more until she had to crane her neck. “I thought you were a bad idea from the start.” Then he stalked away.

After everything that had passed, Jocelyn felt exhausted. She was also very thirsty. Looking around, she didn't see a washbasin. Opening the only other door to the room, she found a water closet and basin. She poured water and cupped her hands to drink from it before cleaning herself with the rag. She was hungry too, but more than that she needed to sleep.

Returning to the room, she climbed onto the bed and curled beneath the covers, planning to sleep only a little while.

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CHAPTER THREE – LYNN

“Jocelyn? Are you ready to wake up, Jocelyn?” a woman asked. Jocelyn blinked, surprised how dark the room was without a lamp. There were no windows, no cracks of light.

“Yes,” Jocelyn answered, her voice croaking and her throat still thick with sleep.

“Good,” the voice answered and a match flared, lighting one lamp after another. The woman had dark hair, but wasn't Sophia. “Here, I've brought you something to eat.” She moved a tray from the side table to Jocelyn's lap. “It's light. We don't want you to be overfull.” The woman's brown eyes gleamed like polished amber. Jocelyn still couldn't fathom what made these people different. On her tray was a pair of rolls, cold beef and cheese. Jocelyn sliced open the roll and slid a piece of meat inside.

“This is perfect, thank you.”

“You are quite welcome. We do want our guests to keep up their strength. I'm Lynn. How have you enjoyed your time with Terrance and Will?”

Jocelyn wrinkled her nose. “Terrance was nice enough, I suppose, but I did not like the way Will treated me.”

Lynn nodded. “Some women do.”

Jocelyn shook her head. Women were treated like that all the time. That was what was wrong with the world. “Well, I'm not one of them.”

“I see that,” Lynn said with a grin. “Do you prefer women?” she asked in a whisper.

“Um...” Jocelyn took another bite while she considered her answer. “I suppose, very slightly. I like men, too, though I despise their taste.” She wrinkled her nose again. “I'd much rather taste a woman.” Jocelyn smiled at Lynn while taking another bite of her roll, imagining sinking her teeth into something else.

“I see. You should finish up quickly then.” Lynn licked her lips and then licked Jocelyn's neck. “I think I'm getting hungry.”

Jocelyn took two more large bites and knocked the tray aside, nearly attacking the woman in bed with her.

“Whoa, girl.” Lynn chuckled, catching Jocelyn's wrists in her hands. Jocelyn tried to pull free, but Lynn was stronger than her slender frame suggested. Jocelyn wasn't big, but bigger than Lynn.

Jocelyn relaxed, but Lynn didn't let go, pushing until Jocelyn lay back against the pillows. Then she held each of Jocelyn's hands down with her shins and positioned herself over Jocelyn's mouth.

“Gid up,” Jocelyn murmured, tipping her chin and stretching to kiss the lips before her. Lynn spread her thighs wider and squatted down over Jocelyn's face. Jocelyn was glad to ease the strain on her neck and put her tongue into her efforts, licking first the button of flesh at the top and then sinking into the canal below. “Mmm.”

“You really do prefer my taste,” Lynn whispered, her breath coming more quickly. “And you are good at that.” Her fingers slid into Jocelyn's hair, twisting it and pulling.

Jocelyn moaned a little and pulled her own knees up, sliding a finger along her slit. She imagined her finger was another tongue, licking, flicking.

Lynn's finger replaced hers, one hand releasing blond locks. “Yes, you are doing so good.”

Jocelyn bit down on her tongue and Lynn's lip as the other woman's fingers curled into her, gripping and lifting her nearly off the bed. She'd never had a woman be so forceful before. Lynn was rubbing violently, and she was hitting the spot inside that only a few had found before.

“Oh, God,” Jocelyn moaned, her mouth pulling very slightly from Lynn's crotch. Lynn only gave her a moment before pressing her hips down and nearly smothering Jocelyn between her legs. Jocelyn's first thought when she choked was, *at least I'll die happy*.

Lynn noticed the snuffling and eased up again, letting Jocelyn gasp and pant. She didn't stop pulling at Jocelyn, though. Her hold there had tightened and her fingers were moving faster.

Jocelyn's eyes rolled as the pleasure threatened to overwhelm her. It seemed she must have climaxed already, but the pleasure hadn't lessened, hadn't become unbearable. As soon as she had her breath back, she stretched up to Lynn and tossed her head. Waves of heat coursed through her, threatening to carry her away with them.

Lynn seemed to fall on her, all of her weight collapsing as her sweetness flooded Jocelyn's mouth. Holding her breath, she tried to lap what she could. It couldn't have been more than a few seconds, but Lynn rolled off, sliding down beside Jocelyn with a hand to her head. “Whoa.”

“Gid up?” Jocelyn asked, grinning.

“I think we gid up all we could.” She laughed and threw an arm around Jocelyn's shoulders hugging her. “I can't wait to do that again, the other way around.”

“Sounds fun,” Jocelyn agreed, kissing Lynn on the mouth. “Can I ask you something?”

“Anything.”

“What makes your eyes look like that?” She couldn't deny her curiosity any longer.

“Oh, umm, it's a side effect.”

“A side effect of what?” Jocelyn could think of a number of illnesses that altered eye color a little, usually yellowish, but never more than a shade, nothing like Sophia's or Terrance's or Lynn's.

Lynn licked her lips. “You won't believe me,” she muttered. “It's too early for that. You will learn in time. After you belong to one of us.” Lynn ran her fingers delicately over Jocelyn's arm, shoulder and neck.

Jocelyn tipped her head away, exposing more skin to Lynn's touch. “Who will it be? How many of you are there?”

“We usually don't give our number. However, as we each sample you, you will find out soon enough.” Lynn sighed quietly. “We are six.”

Jocelyn counted, Sophia and Lynn, Terrance and Will. Two more. “You expect the other two will visit me soon?”

Lynn nipped Jocelyn's shoulder and a fire seemed to accompany the bite. Had she broken the skin? Jocelyn couldn't see and didn't really

care. It felt amazing, like the liquid flame was moving through her, across her breasts. The heat of it made her hotter below and her hand strayed toward her sex. Lynn's fingers got there first, teasing the engorged lips apart.

“No one else will if I don't give you up,” she whispered. “I like you, Jocelyn. You are curious. I can do a lot with curious.”

“So...so...so could Terrance.” Jocelyn's words slurred and started as she gasped for breath. Lynn's fingers were bringing her closer to another climax. Bracing against the headboard, Jocelyn waited for it.

In a series of grunts and groans, Jocelyn rocked on Lynn's fingers. Jocelyn stopped moving, expecting Lynn to do the same, but she didn't. She continued to stroke and tease.

Oddly, Jocelyn didn't feel over-stimulated, she felt a bit numb. Lynn's mouth left Jocelyn's throat and she clucked in irritation. “Too much? Well, we'll just give you a few minutes and then play some more. How many fingers have you had inside you?”

Jocelyn's eyes widened. “I'm not sure. Three, four? Why? What comes next? “ She took the opportunity to gaze at her shoulder. There was a redness, but no blood.

Lynn licked her lips before kissing Jocelyn again, avoiding answering. Jocelyn loved the feel of a woman's lips against her own. There was something softer, plumper about a woman's lips compared with a man. Also, unlike some kissers, Lynn didn't push or pry with her tongue. She touched and darted, just as Jocelyn did. Jocelyn moaned very quietly into Lynn's mouth.

Lynn took that as the sign that Jocelyn was no longer numb. She pinched Jocelyn's nipple and felt her shudder. “More?” Lynn asked.

Jocelyn nodded, loving the surge of heat following the return of blood flow. Lynn kissed and licked her way from Jocelyn's lips to her neck and collarbone. Eventually, she licked hard up one nipple, making Jocelyn tingle down her right side. Then she took the wrinkled point between her teeth and ran her tongue over it again. Jocelyn's hips lifted off the bed, longing for something inside her, something to squeeze. The burn and tingle in her breast was amazing, but it seemed only half what it could be. At a loss, Jocelyn slid two

fingers into herself.

Lynn didn't stop her this time, pinching the first nipple while moving her mouth to the second. “You smell divine,” Lynn told Jocelyn before biting very lightly into her breast. Jocelyn nearly jumped off the bed at the sharp pinch. The pain was immediately followed by more fire, more passion. Bucking into her hand, she wriggled her fingers all she could.

“Yes, so good, so good,” she was mumbling, unable to express the joy that came with the coursing of her pulse.

“Knock knock.” Jocelyn's hand froze at the new, masculine voice. “Can I come in?”

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CHAPTER FOUR – HARRY

“Please,” Lynn said, not rolling from Jocelyn.

“Lynn,” he chided. Jocelyn turned, lifting herself on her elbows to see around Lynn. The man entering was dark, but not black like Will. He had curly dark brown hair on his head and chest, a shadow on his jaw. His eyes were amber like Lynn's. Unlike Will's, they did not seem unkind. “The child cannot obey two masters. You've been with her for over an hour. If you don't give her to me, at least give her a rest.”

Lynn chuckled and Jocelyn joined in. That drew both pairs of sparkling eyes to her and she stopped abruptly. They didn't appear angry. They looked...hungry. She started to grab at the sheets she'd largely ignored before.

The man licked his lips and Lynn slowly pulled herself free of Jocelyn to stand. “You are right, Harry,” she said, stepping up to him. “She does need rest.”

More than words were exchanged, Jocelyn was sure of it, but she couldn't fathom what either said in that gaze.

“You will follow me, Jocelyn. I will wash you.” Rather than look at Jocelyn, the man continued to hold Lynn's eye, seeming to continue their silent conversation. Jocelyn did see a smile quirk the corner of Lynn's mouth.

“I have males who could play with her. One master,” she said quietly.

“And I have female. It is my turn,” Harry told her.

Lynn pursed her lips before striding from the room, straightening the robe that she had never fully removed. Jocelyn was disappointed about that. She hoped to have a chance to delve under it in future. As she thought about it, what the two had been saying really sunk in. One master. She wouldn't be playing in a group, or at least, not primarily.

“You have a very pretty pout. I will turn it into a grimace if you

don't follow me," Harry said.

"Yes, sir," she said, sliding to the edge of the bed and recovering her robe. "Where will we wash?"

"Right here," he told her. "You will fetch the tub and the water."

Her lips twisted again. That did not sound at all alluring.

She jumped when Harry's palm connected with her buttock. It didn't *hurt*, but it didn't make her feel any more comfortable setting about chores either. "Isn't the tub rather heavy?" she asked. She wasn't a weakling, but a whole tub?

"It is of thin porcelain. You will be able to carry it. Just don't drop it," he warned. "It would be very bad for you." His hand clapped on her hip again and she straightened onto her toes. "I might have to do more than a spank." His palm caressed her through the dressing robe before connecting again. "I can do this all day, but I think your bottom won't thank you."

He was right. Already the heat was beginning to spread and the point of contact, nearing pain. "Which way?" she asked, moving to the door.

"The left. We'll get the first kettle on the boil. The kitchen is through there." His arm reached over her shoulder, grazing the skin of her neck. He had to have planned it, but the contact was so brief, so feather-light that she didn't expect the reaction it received. She stepped back rather than forward, feeling his body touching hers in a dozen places along her back. He pulled her hair over the opposite shoulder and kissed the corner where her neck met shoulder, sucking gently.

She cried out when he spanked her this time. That spot was decidedly sore. She was also very frustrated. She stalked through the hall and into the hottest room on a not-so-cool spring day. Grumbling the whole time, she took down a kettle, filled it from the pump, and set it on the stove.

"Does that suffice, sir?" she asked in a snide tone.

"The act does. Your demeanor does not." Faster than she thought possible, he had her bent over his knee, landing slap after slap on her other buttock.

“Stop that! Let me go! Ow! You can't! I didn't!” She never got more than a syllable or two out before she was silenced with another crack on her bottom. Eventually she shut up, but she could feel tears squeezing their way out of the corner of her eyes. She wasn't some little girl, she was a woman! She was strong, stronger than any man had ever given her credit for.

“Done fighting?” Harry asked.

“Yes, sir,” she said through clenched teeth.

“Good. You see, for us to trust you, you must trust us. That means doing as we say, when we say it. It will not be without reward, I promise.”

She nodded, bowing her head more than she had planned. “Will you show me to the tub, sir?” she asked, her tone just shy of insolent.

Harry's amber eyes narrowed. “I will. You should step lightly, Jocelyn, or you will be sitting lightly.”

She had no doubt of that. She'd be sitting lightly as it was. She rubbed herself as she followed Harry's lead.

Passing through the hall, she heard more moans and cries, cracks and slaps. Harry stopped at one door, knocking once before opening.

“May we have the tub, Sophia?” Harry asked, blocking Jocelyn's line of sight.

“You may.” Harry stood aside to give Jocelyn entrance.

“Give her a good show, Lucy,” Sophia crooned to her captive. The woman was tied to a spike that hung from the roof. She was completely suspended, knees splayed by the bar tied to them. The woman screamed into a ball secured in her mouth as Sophia's fingers spread and played with Lucy's swollen red lips. Sophia jerked her hand up and down while Jocelyn stared, unable to break her gaze. She was close enough, that when Sophia removed her hand, liquid sprayed from the woman over Jocelyn's chest, leaving damp patches on the robe.

Jocelyn's mouth hung open. Her eyes bulged and she tried to close her mouth, making odd gabbling noises. She'd never seen anything like that. Nothing in any of her classes or experiences had showed her that a woman could ejaculate.

“How?” she asked when her tongue finally cooperated.

She didn't get an answer. Harry grabbed her roughly and knelt, holding her over the bent knee. Jocelyn kicked, but his other arm across her back held her arms in place. He spanked her severely, leaving both cheeks red and stinging. Tears coursed her cheeks but her whimpers were quieter than Lucy's stifled screams. Sophia hadn't stopped playing with her toy.

“Take the tub,” Harry said when he set her on her feet. “And don't drop it. It's thin enough that it can easily break.”

Jocelyn shuddered but went to the tub. She didn't want to carry it, didn't want to return to her room. She wanted to be suspended where Lucy was.

Harry held the tub over her shoulders so she wore it like a turtle shell, nearly bent double. It was light but very awkward. She stumbled once, and although she let go of one edge, the tub didn't shift.

“Careful,” Harry warned. He must be holding two of the feet.

“Sorry, sir,” she murmured and took hold of the edge of the tub again. Only one more door to go. “Please, help me put it down.”

“Of course.” Together they placed it in the center of the room. “Now, the first kettle of water will be ready. Bring it, quickly.”

Jocelyn played with the tie of her robe. “Please, sir, later...may I...” She looked to the ceiling, hoping to find a similar spike. She gasped a little when she did.

“Water, now.”

“Yes, sir.” She turned and hurried to the kitchen, eager to ask more.

When she returned, heavy handle in two hands, she almost dropped it. There was a harness hanging from the spike.

“Fill the tub,” Harry instructed. “Then start another pot boiling.”

Jocelyn licked her lips, not taking her eyes off the harness. “Yes, sir.” She ran to the kitchen this time.

Closing the door behind her, she looked to the harness again. It didn't look complete. The bar wasn't in place, assuming it was the same harness Lucy had been in.

“We will only try this,” Harry warned her. “Perhaps, with your chosen master, you will do this again, but for now...” He squatted in

front of her, bar in hand. He buckled a leather strap just above either knee. She had to shuffle her feet apart to get the second in place. Next, a similar pair of leather cuffs went on her wrists.

“Here we go,” Harry said with a smile. He scooped her up. “Hang onto my neck,” he instructed as he fastened a metal clip from the harness to her knee buckle. She had to twist to hold on as he fastened the second. His smile was still broad as he pulled the strap joining her wrists through a ring in the harness.

Jocelyn shifted a little, swinging. She was completely suspended. She was also completely helpless. There was nothing she could do to free herself or even move more than a sway. The ceiling was higher than she had first realized and her crotch was only a little under Harry's chin as he circled her, examining.

Inhaling deeply, he said, “You were eager for this.” His tongue darted out and touched her hot skin. She shuddered, shaking in the harness, but barely moving. “Do you like it?” he asked, a finger tracing each of her lower lips, circling her anus.

“Oh, yes. Yes.” She longed to move, to touch herself, to have him touch her more.

“Yes. I think your kettle is ready. I'll be right back.”

“What?” Jocelyn turned her neck to follow him as he left the room. He wouldn't really leave her here, would he? She struggled against the straps, trying to find a way down. She swung and twisted, but couldn't move more than that. She started to cry, scared. Had she handed herself over to someone who would hurt her? Had she made a horrible mistake?

“Look at you. Quite different from when you arrived at my door.”

Jocelyn let her head hang back to see the door, albeit upside down. Sophia stood in the doorway.

“You liked what you saw?” she asked. She frowned when she came closer, stretching up to wipe a hand over Jocelyn's cheek. “You didn't trust Harry?” she asked.

“He left me,” Jocelyn tried to explain.

“For only a minute,” Harry said, moving around Sophia to pour the kettle into the tub. “I'm not sure she will fit in here. She is very

independent.”

Sophia nodded. “I worried about that. A very progressive woman. Scientist, sexually manipulative.”

“You think she meant to manipulate me?” Harry asked, looking at Jocelyn.

“No, no, I didn't. I promise.”

Sophia's lips thinned to a line. “She got you to put her up there.”

Harry clicked his tongue. “I only meant to reward her. She seemed very keen in your room.”

“Yes, I was only curious. I didn't mean-”

“Silence!” both Harry and Sophia said.

“You do not trust,” Sophia said again. “You cannot truly be a part of this house unless you trust your master. We have no place for you otherwise.”

“Please. Let me show you. I will obey,” Jocelyn argued.

“You disobey by speaking,” Harry pointed out. “I know Lynn was looking forward to having her.”

Sophia sighed. “She did seem a fine candidate.” She exchanged a look with Harry that was partially obscured by Jocelyn's leg. “Very well. You may try again. I would have Will train her, but I think neither of them would enjoy that.”

“I'm sure she will be more cooperative in future.”

Jocelyn bit her tongue, instead nodding.

“Much better,” Sophia said with a small smile. “The only word in your vocabulary is 'buckles.' You need no others.”

Jocelyn began to answer “yes” but stopped herself in time.

“Let's get you down from there.” Jocelyn gripped the strap that extended from her wrists, not wanting down now that Harry and Sophia were here. She had no choice, however, as Harry released the strap and she dangled from her suspended knees, her head still inches from the floor. In fact, she was almost level with Harry's waist.

“Wait there,” Sophia said, halting Harry in the process of releasing her. “Terrance says she dislikes tasting men. Can you pleasure him before you pass out?” Sophia wondered. “How long can you hang that way?”

Jocelyn's eyes widened in surprise. She shook her head.

“Try,” Sophia suggested. “I must go release Lucy, but I will return,” she promised, smiling broadly.

Refusal and failure were the same thing at this moment. Jocelyn could not accept failure. Although her hands were tied to one another, there was more than enough slack to work open the buttons of Harry's fly. The fabric fell to his knees and she cupped him in her hands, stroking him.

He took a pace closer, his penis touching her chin. The tip was sticky and made her gag, but she fought the reflex, breathing slowly and deeply. Already the blood was rushing to her head. She bent slightly as lips found her sex. Looking up, she saw Harry's face level with her crotch as well. He set her rocking slightly, his balls connecting with her forehead as his cock bumped her chin, then both retreated, swung closer, retreated.

Closing her eyes, imagining anything else, she opened her mouth and let him slide in. She was rewarded with a sigh from him. He pushed her hips again, increasing her swing. More of him pushed between her lips and a muffled scream escaped her. However, as quickly as he was sliding down her throat, he was also retreating. Not choking her, not making it impossible to breathe—just in, and out. She relaxed as they continued, realizing that the angle was perfect. He didn't jam in her throat or block her air. As she relaxed, his efforts on her sex had more effect, making her breathe more heavily, even grunt on him once in a while.

Twice more he pushed her hips, resuming the swinging, but after the second she was lost in the pleasure of his fingers finding their way into her, tickling her exposed lips, teasing her clitoris. She huffed on the member in her throat as her eyes rolled. He seemed to throb and she closed her mouth on the next swing.

His ejaculate coated her face as his penis collided with her closed lips. It flew into her hair, onto her breasts. She pulled her hands to her face, trying not to scream, trying to stay calm. Normally it wouldn't bother her to wear a man's seed, but hanging like this, she was already on edge.

Masculine arms came under her shoulders, lifting her. His free hand untied her legs, letting her fall against him. As he carried her to the tub, she noticed Sophia standing nearby, empty kettle dangling from her fingers.

“You're all right,” Harry whispered. “You did amazing.”

Jocelyn splashed water on her face, trying to wash away the semen and the tears. The water was blessedly hot, just short of scalding. She shook her head from side to side. Nails bit into her wrists as her hands were pried away. She found herself staring into Sophia's jewel-like eyes.

“You are fine,” she said with authority. “You are not less. You are not trash. You are proud. You did this. You chose this. You gave and now you have received. This is not a sign you are powerless. It is a sign that you grant power, power that is now and is always yours.”

As she talked, Sophia released Jocelyn's hands and they came down. Her breathing became even and she nodded toward the end.

“You have the final power,” Sophia told her. “One word will end any encounter and you will be safe. You must trust us, or we have nothing more to do here.”

Jocelyn nodded. “Yes, mistress.”

Sophia smiled. “You thought you had moved past this, but it's still part of you. We'll make it an even stronger part. It won't rule you, but it will guide you. It will show you where you still let them have power and help you take it back.”

Jocelyn's mouth fell open. “I—”

Sophia covered her mouth with a finger. “There is one more man who will sample you, and one of the men will take you. As much as Lynn or I would like you for ourselves, you will not find the solace you need with a woman. You must find your way with a man.”

Jocelyn nodded again in understanding. It hadn't occurred to her that she still let that incident, that trauma, drive her life, but it was true. There were things that might be enjoyable, if she could find the joy in them again, if she could counteract the pain. It wasn't what she had come here for, but it was something important she could take away.

“Harry?”

“Your turn, Sophia. I'm going to see if Nicholas is free.”

Jocelyn grinned, looking forward to devouring the woman that had claimed her attention since she opened the door that afternoon.

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CHAPTER FIVE – SOPHIA AND NICHOLAS

“I won't stay long,” Sophia warned. She doffed the robe she wore and slipped into the tub, placing herself in Jocelyn's lap.

Jocelyn ran her fingers down Sophia's cheek. “May I ask, Madam?”

Sophia chuckled. “I prefer Mistress. Madam makes me feel old.”

Jocelyn laughed. “You do not look old, Mistress.”

“Well, that's good.”

“What makes your eyes so brilliant? Lynn said I wouldn't believe it, but I keep wondering.”

Sophia didn't answer. She ran her hand along Jocelyn's leg, pulling it over her own and stroking it. “It is a condition. It isn't spreading, though. You would have to...ingest us for it to happen to you.”

At the mention of ingesting, Jocelyn kissed Sophia's neck, nibbling on it.

Sophia laughed. “A little more than that.”

“But not here.” Jocelyn took her time, running her fingers along the crease of Sophia's thigh and up the inside before curling her fingers to tease the other woman's labia. “I ingested plenty from there.”

Sophia hummed, sinking lower in the bath and sending a small wave cresting over the side. She sat up. “Bother. That's very bad for the floor, the reason we don't fill the tub very full.”

Jocelyn stayed in place, frowning when Sophia began to pull herself out of the tub. She didn't say anything else, learning slowly.

Sophia left the room and Jocelyn sighed, extracting herself from the tub as well. When Sophia came back with an arm full of towels, Jocelyn wrapped one around herself. Sophia dropped the rest in a pile.

“Actually, you will clean that up,” she said with a confident smile.

Jocelyn's annoyance must have been clear on her face, but Sophia's expression didn't change. She stood watching, waiting. Gritting her teeth, Jocelyn wondered if they didn't have staff for this sort of thing.

It was a fine house, they must have money. But no, they can get their lovers to cook and clean. Why should they hire anyone?

She didn't say anything, but Sophia slapped her bottom while Jocelyn was bent over. Her hand landed squarely between Jocelyn's legs and made her jump. That was the oddest sensation. It hurt, but she was aroused. She put a little more effort into moving the damp towel over the floor. She swapped at one point, to get a dry one. Sophia took the moment to land another smack. Jocelyn shuddered, tingling along the hand print.

“More?” Sophia asked, her hand cupping Jocelyn, rubbing her. “Maybe some of what Lucy got?” Her fingers slid into Jocelyn, twisting to turn her palm down. Jocelyn shifted on her hands and knees, not entirely sure what to expect.

Sophia curled her fingers inside and used her other hand to rub Jocelyn's clit. It all built so quickly, Jocelyn couldn't quite believe it. Usually it took a little bit of foreplay for her to change gears, but Sophia had her ready to orgasm in seconds.

Her belly felt hard, full, and when Sophia used the hand not stroking to press down on Jocelyn's pubic bone, the girl's eyes bugged out. There was a splashing sound as heat spread from Jocelyn's sex to her head and toes in one combustive burst.

She screamed with it and then pulled her knees up to her chest, curling into a ball. Her entire body felt like it was on edge. It reminded her of the last fever she had, every breath of wind, every hair, was heightened by her sensitivity. She shook and shivered, waiting for the sensation to pass.

It did in a few moments. When she had a hold of herself again, she saw Sophia using a towel to wipe the stream on the floor. The woman's blue eyes weren't on her task, but on Jocelyn, concern and amusement warring in them.

Jocelyn seized the towel, needing to know what was in that ejaculate. Where did it come from? What purpose did it have?

Sophia grabbed Jocelyn's hair and her neck was bent back. “That was impolite, love.”

“A-apologies, Mistress,” Jocelyn squeaked.

“Accepted.” Sophia released her grip. “It's not extraordinary. Not really any different than your normal juices. Simply...more violent.”

That was a fact. Normally she oozed, she secreted, it was a small amount. This was a torrent released with force! She sniffed the towel and even licked at it, but couldn't deny Sophia's observation. It did seem to be a diluted version of what she normally tasted like.

“I was summoned?” a male voice asked. Jocelyn looked up to see a blond man standing in the doorway. Like Harry, he wore no shirt. Jocelyn didn't examine him long before turning back to the towel.

“Give me that,” Sophia said in exasperation. “You have other things to concern you now.”

Jocelyn pouted a little as she let the soft fabric go.

“A bath. I think I might like one of those.” The man pulled the string holding his pants up and they fell to his ankles. Now he had Jocelyn's attention again. “You will join me?” His tone made it seem a request, but his eyes were expectant. She would obey.

“Happily, sir.”

His lips pursed. “Sir. I like it.” Apparently Master and Mistress were the common modes of address. Jocelyn, who couldn't remember when she'd worn her robe last, slid into the tub atop the man whose name she didn't know.

There was something alluring about that, sex with a stranger. She splayed her legs so his shaft came between her lower lips and she could tease the head of him.

He shifted lower in the water, opening a little space between their genitalia. He took himself in his hand and began rubbing her with his cock.

So many new things! No man had done this before. They were all quick to have themselves covered either by a mouth or a pussy.

“Yes, yes, sir.” She wondered if she should be silent, but she couldn't be. “Saints alive. Goddamn. That feels so good.” She would have used more colorful language when Sophia had made her orgasm so hard, but it had been too fast. This was much slower, more drawn out, she had time to voice all the pleasure he gave.

His free hand came between them and rubbed the crack between

her cheeks. As always, when someone touched her there, she immediately stiffened. Her reaction didn't affect the man beneath her who didn't pause in using his cock as a giant finger. She couldn't stay hesitant long.

She stiffened again when the finger dipped into her anus. It didn't burn this time, didn't snag at all. It was still too much for her. “Buckles,” she said, pushing herself up.

The man held her bottom, helping her rise. “Let me get you a new towel.” He took one of the ones from the floor and wrapped it around his waist, shaking out his hair. Jocelyn pushed her own out of her face, the blonde locks curling.

“Thank you,” she said, surprised.

He was back quicker than Sophia, though he held only one towel. He wrapped it around her shoulders and rubbed her dry.

“You are all right?” he asked, concern in his jewel-like blue eyes. Her took hold of the clasp of the chain around her neck, releasing it.

“I-Yes. Fine. It didn't hurt.”

His smile was small. “But it was bad.”

She nodded. “Not terrible. I didn't really mean to stop.”

His smile grew. “Unfortunately, that's what the word is for. To stop. I don't have to go. I could lie beside you a while.”

She nodded. “I would like that. I want to understand more. Sophia said I would need to ingest you to get eyes like yours. Is it more than your eyes, though? You all seem very fast.”

The man frowned a little. “We don't normally talk about that before one has spent a few sessions with their Master. We can make special use of those willing to submit completely.

“Submit completely to what?”

The man sighed a little, tucking her into his arm over the sheets. It was late, but the house still hadn't cooled. “Easiest to show you.” He tilted her head away from him, exposing her neck. She smiled expecting a playful nip.

He bit her. She almost jumped, but resisted at the last moment. That was a blessing; she would have torn her throat on his teeth if she had moved much. She heard him swallow and her eyes went wide.

Before she could do more than register the sound, the same liquid fire she had felt in her shoulder earlier in the day spread across her chest and up into her chin. It spread faster toward her belly and lower, making her moan and slip a hand between her thighs.

“Oh, God, what are you doing? That feels...it feels...” She couldn't find the words. Worse, she was becoming light-headed. She felt the little tension holding her head up release and she sank into the pillow.

“Oh, damn, too much? You taste so good.”

The words in combination with the action told her what she needed to know. He was a vampire. They were all vampires.

In the same moment she was terrified and disbelieving. There were no vampires. But he bit her, she was bleeding. Slapping a hand to her neck, she edged away.

“Please don't hurt me,” she whispered.

The man sighed heavily. “This is why we wait. You don't trust us yet. I'm not going to hurt you. Not more than you can handle, at any rate.” His lascivious smile made her feel exposed, which she was. Completely naked.

Jocelyn continued to slide from him until he rose. “I'll leave you. Feel free to dress and leave the house. You need never return. Remember, you are sworn to secrecy. We are as vulnerable as you feel right now.” His blue eyes were serious.

“You're vulnerable?” she asked. “To what? A stake to the heart?”

He rubbed his chest. “That would certainly hurt. Alone, that wouldn't kill us. We can heal from almost anything in time. No, fire is our weakness.”

She nodded. “And sunlight.”

He shook his head. “Again, it hurts, burns, but won't kill us on its own.”

Jocelyn considered for a moment. “Why are you telling me this? You are arming me to fight you.”

The vampire smiled again. There was no sign of fangs or any other difference in his teeth. “It might surprise you, but we trust you. At least, I do. You aren't asking as one who is planning an attack. You are asking as one who is curious.”

She was definitely that. “So to become...a vampire,” the idea was still ludicrous to her, “I have to eat you?”

“Drink,” he clarified. He lifted his wrist to his mouth and bit it. The wound was small and stopped bleeding quickly, but there were a few drops of pink blood on his skin. Jocelyn seized his hand to examine it.

Her companion chuckled. “Very curious. I see why Lynn likes you.”

Jocelyn looked up to share a grin of her own. “I like her, too. May I?” she asked, her finger hovering over the strange blood. It was as thick as her blood, holding together in large drops rather than running like water. The color was bizarre, though, like it lacked iron. Collecting a drop on her finger, she lifted it to her mouth.

It didn't taste like blood either. It didn't have much flavor at all, slightly sweet. “That won't turn me into a vampire, right?” she asked. Her curiosity was going to kill her one day.

He laughed. “No! You have to drink me to the point of death. When you feel like you can't possibly swallow another drop, you'll have had enough.”

“Do you make a lot of vampires?” she asked, leaning closer to his wrist to look at blood and wound more closely.

“Almost none. Harrold was the last and that was almost fifty years ago now.”

Her head came up quickly, crashing into the vampire's nose. He held his face while he cursed.

She was surprised to see it. “That hurt?” she asked.

“Hell, yes,” he snapped angrily. “I still feel pain. In fact, it feels worse.” Closing his watering eyes, he took a few slow breaths. “It was an accident,” he said.

She felt bad for hurting him, and it must have shown in her expression. “Yes, I'm sorry.”

“Accepted,” he said, lowering his hand.

“Fifty years?” she asked again, stupefied. Harry didn't look any older than Jocelyn. “How old are you?”

He sighed. “Older than I like to admit.”

“Two hundred years? Three?”

“I'd rather not say,” he said again. Jocelyn was pretty sure she

wouldn't get another answer.

“And the others, they are all older than Harry.”

“That's right.”

She shook her head in disbelief. “I came for the sex,” she murmured.

He laughed. “I'm sure you did! That's what most people come for. It's our exchange. In return for keeping us healthy and strong, we give you an unrivalled sexual experience. Would you agree?”

Jocelyn certainly couldn't compare her time here to anything she'd done before. The harness, the black man, the ejaculation...all new.

“Can I stay?” she asked.

He smiled. “Of course. You're free to leave, but I think we'd all be happy for you to stay.”

“No, I meant. I need a new place to live. My roommate is leaving. Do people stay here?”

His brow furrowed. “No. Not normally.”

She sighed. “Well, then I suppose I should go and start looking for a new roommate.”

He grabbed for her arm as she rose and she turned to face him.

“It's the middle of the night. Rest, have breakfast before you go.”

Could she sleep in a house full of vampires? How would she be sure they wouldn't kill her in her sleep?

“We haven't killed anyone in a long time,” he said, reading her thoughts. “And that time it was an accident.”

“An accident?” she asked.

“Yes. We try not to drink too much, but as you could tell, it's difficult to judge with some people.”

Jocelyn recalled getting light headed earlier. “I don't know if I'll be able to sleep here,” she admitted.

“Then you should probably go,” he said sadly. “It was a pleasure to meet you, Jocelyn,” he said, bowing over her hand before picking up his pants.

“I never got your name,” she called as he moved to the door.

“I'm Nicholas,” he said, pulling it shut behind him.

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CHAPTER SIX – LEFT ALONE

Jocelyn donned the robe and lay down, but she didn't sleep. She was still too wound up. There really were vampires? And they didn't kill people, they...had sex with them? It didn't make sense. Biologically, there must be another purpose for their existence. Were they ancestors of humans? Were they another species entirely? She asked herself more and more questions while getting no answers.

Her biggest question, which came every time her eye landed on the spike in the ceiling, was why they played with their prey. For a little while, yes. Cats did the same, but in the end, the prey was killed, eaten. Not here. Here they...what? Grew too old to come back? Jocelyn could not make sense of it.

There was one thing she could answer, one thing she did know. She didn't want to leave. Go home for a few days, fine, but she did not want to be asked to leave and not return. If that meant trusting these strange creatures, they'd done nothing to betray that trust. If it meant being obedient, well, she'd have to practice, that was all. She'd certainly put on a good show for superiors in the past. It wouldn't be that difficult.

She expected the puzzling, added to the late hour, would make her sleepy, but it didn't. The house became quiet, but still she sat.

Frustrated, she opened her door and peeked into the hall. There were a few lamps giving very dim illumination, but it was enough that she felt confident following the wall. Her curiosity would one day get the better of her, but so far, it had still only brought her good things. As she passed the parlor, she heard sounds again. They led her to a staircase. At the base of the stairs she could hear much more clearly what was happening above. It sounded like her kind of party. Men and women, more than one of each. Staying to the edge, she climbed silently, wanting to see who and what was going on.

The door at the top was closed, but the noises were irresistible. She

turned the knob slowly.

All noise stopped. Jocelyn nearly ran down the stairs, afraid she knew what the sudden stillness meant. Before she had let go of the handle, the door whipped inward, sending her sprawling to the floor.

Looking up through her disheveled hair, she saw all six vampires. All but Will were in various stages of engagement. Will held the door.

“Someone has been naughty,” he said with a glint in his shiny black eyes.

Jocelyn trembled.

“Someone doesn't know her place,” Sophia said, nudging Harry's head from between her legs and disentangling herself from Terrance's embrace. “You were warned once.”

“I-I...It was so quiet.”

“Ah, kitten,” Nicholas said. Lynn was perched in his lap.

“You mean, downstairs, that wasn't enough?” she asked in disbelief.

“May I?” Will asked, looking around the room.

“No, Will. Not here. Take her downstairs.”

“Why?” she asked quickly, pushing herself up and inching along the wall away from the large black man. He was so close she could see pale scars across his chest. “What makes this room different?” She kept talking, kept asking questions, hoping to find a way out of this that wouldn't ban her from the house.

“Because no one is the master here,” Lynn explained. Neither she nor Nicholas moved, and Jocelyn wondered how she could do that while obviously filled with him.

“Then, couldn't I...?” She wanted to ask, wanted to join. This was exactly the sort of thing she wanted.

“Not yet,” Sophia said, wrapping her arm around Jocelyn's shoulder. “We can arrange something similar. Have you ever had multiple men? Will might be able to arrange something. It would definitely be different than when-”

Jocelyn ducked under Sophia's arm and ran to the other side of the room. Before she reached the wall, she was looking down at two deep brown cheeks. She screamed as a hand landed hard on her bottom. She was sure her skin had been broken. Her blood rushed to her head

as she tried to understand what had just happened. Will must have thrown her over his shoulder. These vampires were wickedly fast. She really was a kitten next to them. They could crush her in a heartbeat. Fear prickled and made her pulse race. She had no idea what Will would do to her. Based on their first encounter, she was fairly certain she didn't want to know.

“I will take care of this,” Will said, turning toward the door.

“Excellent,” Sophia said. Jocelyn pushed herself up enough to see Sophia, her beautiful white skin gleaming in a sheen of sweat, make her way between Harry and Terrance again. She wanted that woman so badly. It seemed she would have to settle for men for a while longer.

Looking over the others, both Lynn and Nicholas had sympathetic gazes, but only for a few seconds before Lynn was grinding her hips into Nicholas' and arching her back with pleasure.

“If I use my word, you'll leave me be,” Jocelyn said, sure she had it right.

“Yes,” Will said. His voice had a subtle drawl. “But you won't use it. You don't want to be put out of the house.” He slapped her ass again and she yelled. She kicked too, punching his back. Once she'd worked herself into a full tantrum, Will tossed her on her bed, taking no notice of her assault.

“Hush, or I'll fill your mouth with something to silence it.” He held a finger to her lips and her eyes went wide. She nodded.

“Now. You have two choices. You can lay nicely and sleep, or you can be tied to that bed. Which would you prefer?”

“Why would you-?”

She didn't finish the question before Will was in and out of the wardrobe with a length of black rope in his hands. He hooked her right wrist in a loop. Her pulse hadn't really slowed but it raced faster at the symbol of her weakness.

He stopped, holding the rope toward her left wrist. “What will it be?” he asked again.

She licked her lips, considering. Perhaps this house wasn't the place for her. Perhaps she should just get dressed and walk out.

“I'll make it worth your while,” Will said in a whisper.

“May I ask?” she said, nearly squeaking.

Will smiled, brilliant white teeth between dark lips. “Ask.”

“Why do you want to tie me?”

“Why do you think?”

“So I can't fight you.”

He shook his head. “So you can't fight yourself,” he answered. It made more sense than her answer. It was obvious she couldn't really fight him. He looped her free wrist and tied both to her ankles. She was on her back on the bed with her hands and feet in the air, still wearing the robe.

“Now, you will see.”

He began by rubbing her. It was a familiar sensation, the burning, the sequence of tightening and loosening.

“Yes, yes,” she murmured as the heat in her rose. She would climax soon. “God that feels good.”

Will said nothing, watching her as she started to writhe. She fell to her side and he put a hand to her hands and feet, holding them to the mattress. Then he rubbed faster.

“No!” she yelled, the burning too much. She was too sensitive, it was unbearable. Tossing her head, she tried again to wriggle away. Will's hand held her in place.

“No,” she said again, whimpering. “No. Too mu-! Holy God!” She screamed as another white hot climax hit her. She started bucking against Will's tight hold. He stopped rubbing her, holding her hip instead as she tossed.

“Fighting yourself,” he said again. “You don't normally come that hard.”

She shook her head. An orgasm was usually a pleasant plateau. That was violent.

“Want to do it again?”

She tried to block him, but she was still tied up. He didn't rub her, thankfully, but he pulled her legs up into the air again and plunged into her.

It had been over an hour since her time with Nicholas, and he

hadn't entered her. She was tight and Will was thick. He was also long and this angle, she knew, would make each thrust deeper.

She expected he would fuck her the way he had rubbed, fast and brutally, but instead he stroked slowly, hitting her cervix with each thrust. At first, they were just taps, sending a jolt to let her know he'd hit bottom. As he sped up, each jab made her groan, her eyes rolling up. It also made her jaw snap shut, once biting her tongue. The small pain didn't stop her from enjoying each thrust.

It wasn't long before she could feel fluid sliding down her back. He moved one hand to play with a breast and she watched his dark fingers tease her pale skin. There was something erotic about that contrast. And his hand was big, covering her breast and more.

Clenching around him, she arched her back. “Yes!”

He didn't stop. Once again, he kept moving right through her orgasm. Her hips seemed to have a mind of their own, tilting and gyrating.

“Like that, bitch?” he asked, sliding a hand over her belly to rub her again. “Are you my bitch in heat?”

“Ugh, yeah, mmm, heat. Fuck.” Jocelyn's mind couldn't seem to find words anymore. She wasn't sure she could see the room anymore, everything seeming to be blackness with occasional sprays of stars.

“Just a little more,” Will said, thrusting hard and fast. Jocelyn's pussy was dripping and tingling, but the friction was starting to wear through, making her burn. She could barely feel it as things darkened further.

Then, nothing.

She woke with a start, legs kicking. They weren't tied. Neither were her wrists, though both had slightly pink abrasions from the rope. Her sex was sore. The burning she'd barely felt toward the end throbbed now. She whimpered and pulled her legs together.

“Poor kitten.”

Jocelyn sat up, hair in her face, to see a shape on the other side of the room. A lantern flared and illuminated Sophia, dressed in her characteristic robe.

“It seems we have a problem,” Sophia said, moving to the bed to sit

beside her. “You do not know how to be obedient.”

Jocelyn frowned and then covered her face. “No. I try,” she said with a sharp inhalation, tossing her hair back. “But I've never been able to, not since-” She stopped abruptly, feeling tears in her eyes. How odd, what was she so worked up about? It had to be the turmoil of the past day. She was never this emotional. However, her chest felt tight and she tried to swallow against a lump in the throat.

“He was someone you knew,” Sophia said quietly. “Someone you trusted.”

Jocelyn's eyes teared up and she nodded, holding her nose. It was her cousin, Douglas. He had invited her to a party with his friends, but she had been the only girl there. It was obvious what they had planned, and even then she wasn't inexperienced, but nothing prepared her for the way they treated her. She'd been raised by an independent woman. Her father had died when she was a girl, and her mother taught her that if she wanted something done, it was best not to wait for a man to do it for her. Douglas had been her friend back then, until he tried to show her women couldn't stand on their own.

She shook her head at the flood of memories, the pain, the betrayal.

“We will have to be gentle with you,” Sophia said. “Treat you like the kitten you are. Please don't claw us, though. You have a place, down here. That's for us, up there. Bad kittens can't be kept.”

Sophia stroked Jocelyn's head, completing the image of a tawny cat. Jocelyn didn't care if they saw her as a pet. Right now, she needed Sophia, needed anyone, to hold her until the bitterness went away again. Until she was strong again. Sobbing, she wrapped her arms around Sophia's waist and buried her face in that silky blue robe.

“That's it, kitten. Let it out. We don't judge here. You're safe with us.”

“H-how?” she asked, sniffling back tears. “How can I be safe with you? You eat people.” It sounded absurd even as she said it.

Sophia laughed, a deep throaty chuckle. “Oh, love, we don't eat people. We sample you just as you have sampled many, many people, I'm sure.”

Jocelyn had to smile at that. She wasn't sure she could count the

number of cocks or pussies she'd had in her mouth. “I'm really safe here? I can stay?”

Sophia sighed. “Will was the last human to live with us. I don't like it. We need your abject obedience when we feed so we don't hurt you. Living with us, you might lose that edge.”

Jocelyn nodded. “That's understandable.”

“I'm tempted,” Sophia admitted. “You, I think, could really fit in here. But we need time to see that.”

Jocelyn brightened. “Really? You think so? I've never experienced anything like what I have here.”

Sophia stroked her hand, petting again. “Slow, kitten. Very slow. I want you to work with Will.” Jocelyn's smile faded quickly to a frown. “He prefers men. He has many that he could bring, in pairs.”

“Why?”

Sophia was silent for a while, her hand still petting away. “Because here you can be treated badly and know you are still strong. You are more than what other people think of you. Here it will be a game that will make mockery of the past. Are you strong enough for that?”

Jocelyn shook her head, more tears leaking out. “No. I don't want to do that. I don't want to go there.”

“Exactly why you must. Once you have, you will be unstoppable.”

She continued denying. “I can't.”

“Not now,” Sophia agreed, using a finger to lift Jocelyn's chin. “But one day soon you will be. I can see it in your eyes,” she said, gazing deeply into Jocelyn's. Then she leaned close and kissed her.

Jocelyn could taste her tears, but the taste of Sophia washed it away. Her lips were soft and plump, just as she'd imagined they would be. They were slightly sour, tart, and Jocelyn slipped her tongue out to taste more.

Sophia didn't back away, but moved her arms to hold Jocelyn closer, one hand sliding up into her blond hair. Sophia's tongue darted out, too, licking along Jocelyn's lips, curling slightly. Jocelyn pulled harder, crushing herself to the other woman, seeking solace in the kiss. Sophia didn't hold back, meeting desperation with passion, with warmth.

The nature of the kiss gave Jocelyn strength, and her tongue became less forceful, less searching. She let the kiss evolve into something with more meaning than two people crashing together. There was assurance, trust, and love.

Jocelyn broke the kiss gently, licking her lips and sitting up again. “Thank you.”

“You're welcome, kitten. I do hope you stay.” With that, she gave Jocelyn another stroke of the head and left the room.

The door didn't close on Sophia before opening on Will.

“How is my bitch this morning? Or should I say afternoon, you lazy slut.”

His foul language stung her and she cringed away from the angry black man. He leaned closer, forcing her to meet his gaze.

She blinked in astonishment. There was laughter in his eyes. It was a game. That was what Sophia had said. Will didn't mean the awful things he said?

If it was a game, she had only a vague idea of the rules. She didn't have the chain she wore yesterday, but she doubted she would ever call Will by his first name, ever disobey him. She knew obedience was key, but beyond that, what response was appropriate?

“I'm sorry, Sir.”

His lips curved up for the briefest second before his hand came down hard on her thigh. “And you should be, lazy bitch. I suppose you haven't eaten yet either, lying in bed all day. Go on. Make and eat it or I'll feed it to you.”

Jocelyn jumped up, noticing she still wore her robe from last night. She adjusted and tied it as she padded across the floor.

Will followed. He whispered just loud enough for her to hear. “Make a mistake once in a while. The punishment is part of the game.”

She smiled, finally seeming to understand. She didn't answer, though, and she was famished. Breakfast was a fantastic idea.

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CHAPTER SEVEN – MEN

Jocelyn never dreamed so many men came to Blue Moon House, but it seemed Will's mission to ensure that every one that did had his chance to fuck her. None of them took her of their own choosing or in their preferred way, but each was ordered by their Master or Mistress to make use of her, break her in, or otherwise fill her with a cock.

Will made her practice her least favorite positions before unleashing other men on her. First was taking a man orally. It was still something she tolerated rather than enjoyed, especially when he held her head. She almost bit him the first time he pressed her head down on him.

“Relax your throat,” he ordered. “You can do this, slut. Your holes are mine, all of them. And they can all take me.”

That had made it a challenge, and therefore something she couldn't back away from. It surprised her how quickly she became good at it. What had once been a chore, was now...not an art, but definitely a skill, one she was honing. Will let her know, usually by biting her, when she was doing well. The effect his saliva had continued to amaze her. He wouldn't touch her in any other way, but her lower lips would become engorged, begging to be touched. He used some of his special words when she didn't resist and rubbed herself while sucking him.

“That's my tawdry piss pot. My pristine crystal shitting bowl. Such beauty to hold such filth. Take it from your beard-splitter.” She wondered where he came up with some of them. They were all so articulate, better than English professors had managed, though they were always searching to make her sound more divine, not more base. Once she had actually laughed. What was a “scrootchy bubber?”

He had been quite angry when she stopped sucking him to laugh, taking her hair in his hand and wrenching her head back. “What's funny?”

“What is a bubber and how is it scrootchy?” she asked.

Will's expression shifted between irritation and amusement. Eventually he let out a low chuckle. “I forget my age sometimes. A bubber is a drinking vessel.”

She knew what scrootchy meant: tight. She snickered anyway. “You would like to drink from me?” she asked.

He growled, irritation making his dark face even darker. “Yes.” He scooped her up and dropped her on her bed. “I want to fill you as well.” Turning away, he straddled her face. He lowered himself until his cock was rubbing her chin. “Open up,” he commanded, using a hand to guide himself. Her hands immediately gripped her sheets. He'd done this once before and keeping her mind on the member in her mouth while he played with her was difficult to impossible.

Will's chest was an inch from her skin, but that distance closed as he plunged into her mouth. “That's it. Eat me up, whore.”

Jocelyn gurgled as she adjusted her position to make it easiest to take him in her mouth. As soon as she had found one that worked, Will dropped his head to her thighs and pumped his hips up and down.

Jocelyn took slow steady breaths through her nose. The memory of men forcing themselves down her throat came to mind, but disappeared quickly when Will made his movements slow, working himself into her throat rather than forcing.

She gagged when he bit into her inner thigh. The burst of pain, followed by an intense wave of heat, often had that effect. Adjusting to her increasing arousal, she relaxed her throat and moved one hand, holding Will's balls and massaging them. His moan made her heart swell. It was true that he preferred men, so every time she brought him pleasure, it felt like a victory. She moved her head a little, trying to elicit another response.

She was in luck. He moved his head higher, moving from her thighs to her sex. “Perfect. That is the slut I love to fuck.” It wasn't degrading at all and she moved her free hand to the base of his length, rubbing when he pulled out of her and opening when he thrust in. She gave it her best effort, knowing she would be distracted very soon. She smiled when he grunted.

She gagged again when he licked her entire length from clitoris to anus. Her hips rose to his mouth, giving him more access to the tighter hole below. He circled that once before her hips fell back to the bed and she turned her head, unable to breathe.

“Give me that mouth again,” he demanded, lifting his hips. “I'm not done with it yet.” He moved faster now, but Jocelyn had learned how to breathe, how to hold him, how to swallow at the right time. He groaned again even as her eyes rolled from his breath on her wet lips. “Ugh, I'm going to make you come too, bitch. You want that?” His tongue was replaced with his fingers gripping her hard, fingers curled into the sensitive spot inside that never seemed hidden to him.

She made a strangled noise around his cock, unable to speak, unable to scream, unable to bear the intensity of his half-violent finger-fucking. Jocelyn closed her tearing eyes and waited for the end.

It didn't take long. As she continued to make strangled noises, she felt Will throbbing on her tongue, felt the walls of her vagina constricting. They would both come in moments. Her cries became higher pitched, squealing, as his fingers slopped against the juices she had produced. His hot seed pumped straight into her throat and she swallowed twice, drinking it all.

When she had met him, Jocelyn thought she wanted nothing more than to break Will, to make him desire her in such a way he would deny her nothing. It had worked on every man she had ever met. None of them had been William. It was obvious he tolerated her attempts but wasn't enticed by them. He didn't desire her body, only her obedience. Her mouth could please him, but her pussy was only another outlet for him, not something he craved. It was clear in his eyes when he fucked her. When he finally came, she could almost see another man reflected in them instead of herself. It was a strange feeling, inadequacy in sex, but it wasn't personal, and she was able to please him. Being disarmed didn't make her feel weak. It did make her try harder.

After ensuring she was obedient, compliant, Will brought the first of his pets, Michael. He repeated Will's performance the night she had stolen upstairs and found the vampires enjoying each other and tied

her. That had been fun. Will had tied her up several times now, and she had to agree, being unable to squirm away, close her legs, or otherwise evade her Master's ministrations gave her intense pleasure. To her disappointment, Will had never hung her from the spike; he preferred having her near the ground. She had already been tied to the bed when Will brought Michael in. Three or four orgasms must have passed before Will finally gave Michael permission to come in her.

When Louis was brought to her room, it was to fuck her throat. Those were Will's exact words and Louis was obedient. Jocelyn had actually vomited, using her word as soon as the bile stopped spilling from her lips.

“Louis, clean that,” Will ordered. The man jumped to do his master’s bidding. While he did, Will stripped the soiled robe from Jocelyn and carried her to the kitchen, setting her on the table.

“Sorry,” she said with downcast eyes.

Will paused in wetting a soft cloth at the pump. He wrung it out and mopped at her chest with the cool damp rag.

“Nonsense. You have impressed me,” he told her, brushing her hair back. “I expected you to demand he stop after the first thrust. You have come a long way.” He rinsed out the cloth and filled a glass with the water for her to drink before using the cloth on the dirty streaks in her hair.

She drank greedily, trying to wash away the burn in her throat.

Will took the glass and pulled it away. “Not too much. You'll upset your stomach again.” It flopped at that moment, agreeing with the Master.

“Yes, sir,” Jocelyn agreed, taking a small sip.

“Better.”

“Master,” Louis asked from the doorway. “I have finished.”

“Good work. Go back to your room. I will be there shortly.” Will didn't even look at his plaything. Instead he stroked Jocelyn's face again, wiping away the tears that streaked her cheek. “I think Sophia is free. I'll send her or Lynn to you.”

Jocelyn smiled and jumped down from the table. “Thank you.”

Every time Jocelyn had called “buckles,” Will had sent one of the women to console her. It surprised her how few times she had had need of them.

Curling on her side, Jocelyn held herself. That hadn't been as horrific as she expected, but she still hurt, still shivered with the memories that it brought. Especially alone, those ugly thoughts overwhelmed her.

The door opened, and before Jocelyn could look up, Sophia was curled around her stroking her hair. “That's my kitten. Such a good pet. You are special, Jocelyn. We all want the best for you.”

“Even if that's staying here?” she asked, tentative. She knew Sophia was here to console, not indulge her.

“Your roommate?” she asked. Jocelyn had told her everything, including that Daisy was getting married in little more than a month.

“Hardly home,” she said with a weak sigh. “She's so busy with the wedding. Did you know she had a dress made for me? Why my best isn't good enough, I don't know. She said she wants it to flatter me.”

“She flatters you,” Sophia said, stroking Jocelyn's hair.

“Have you thought more about it?” Jocelyn asked, hopeful.

Sophia's hand stopped stroking. “Yes. I haven't decided yet, but I think it might work.”

Jocelyn didn't jump, she didn't giggle, she just closed her eyes and lay quietly. Her throat was sore, and she was certain Sophia didn't want her to take too much encouragement from the small step.

It had only been a few months of visits, but Jocelyn knew what she wanted, what she was going to be sure she achieved. “I'm going to be one of you one day.” Her voice was a whisper, but she knew Sophia heard her.

“I think so, too,” Sophia said as quietly.

Jocelyn drifted off with a smile on her face. She dreamed of the time when she would live forever, never age. She would be strong and beautiful and spend every night with Sophia, enjoy her time with Lynn and Terrance, Harry and Nicholas. She'd even come to appreciate Will, something she wouldn't have thought possible. She wanted to spend forever with them.

More men were brought to her. Terrance brought Bertram, Lynn brought David and Walter. Sophia had four men and said more would come. Jocelyn was eager to have two men at once, to test her new skill with her mouth. She'd done it before, reluctantly, usually rubbing her partner rather than sucking. That wasn't a problem anymore and she found rocking between the two cocks presented to her was very satisfying.

Her joy at being between two men was only augmented by the hope of moving into Blue Moon House. Each time she undressed in her room, she hoped tonight they would tell her she could stay, that they wanted to keep her.

She didn't get that pleasure the day Will brought a new challenge. He was waiting in her room when she arrived.

“Comfortable, slut? Take off that dress and bend over the bed.”

Jocelyn resisted the urge to sigh. He might well punish her for that. On the other hand, she'd been coming to enjoy some of those. Instead she started working open the buttons behind her. Once she was down to just stockings and corset she bent, her ass thrust out. He didn't often fuck her this way, but she expected nothing else.

She jumped when something cold landed on her skin. Twisting to see what was happening, Will put his hand to her shoulder blades, pressing her into the bed. “I'm going to tie your wrists,” he told her. “Keep you this way.” He didn't have to let go of her to reach into the wardrobe and pull free the rope. Jocelyn took slow breaths, trying to calm herself. She wasn't afraid, not anymore. She was anxious, wondering what he had planned.

Will's fingers probed her and Jocelyn kicked one leg up. Will nudged her thigh with a knee, making the foot drop again. It was a common reflex of hers. He pinned her other thigh as well and she shivered, expecting something really stimulating next.

His finger circled her puckered hole and she started to squirm. “No, please. Not there.”

“It's time, bitch. I take my men this way, and all your holes are mine.”

Jocelyn tensed, anticipating pain. She bucked against the bed when

Will bit into her buttock, sending a flare of sensation through her leg. Now she was hot and wanted him in her all the more, but still he circled her anus.

It was starting to burn there, tingling. Whatever he had spread made his finger slide easily, teasing her.

“That's it, pussy, relax.” She did, her breathing becoming deeper as she sighed in pleasure.

His finger slipped in and she tensed.

Leaning over her back, he bit into the back of her neck, drinking from her. She heard him swallow several times and her vision blurred a bit. Light-headed, she relaxed again, losing focus.

His finger slid farther into her and he turned it in a circle. “There, that's my whore, opening for your beard-splitter.” She'd had to ask Sophia, but now she knew that meant whore-owner. Relaxing further, she started to enjoy the sensations coming from inside. It was fullness, like when a cock stuffed into her still-tight vagina. Just like it, in fact. She was stretched, but not painfully, not the way she remembered. She let out a small moan.

“You like this, bitch? Like me working your little hole? We'll make it bigger, won't we? Practice.” She was only half listening, still reeling from the blood loss and the arousal resulting from his bite. “Just like your mouth, you can take me here.”

She didn't imagine she could. Will was much larger than average. She'd had trouble taking someone much smaller. When a second finger joined the first, she winced, proving her point.

Will removed both fingers, sliding them lower and stroking her slick vagina. “Enough for one night,” he said, fucking her with his fingers. “You earned a reward.”

“Th-thank you,” she managed.

He slapped her ass hard, the sting turning her on even more. “How do you address me?” he asked. Then he slapped the other cheek and she squealed.

“Thank you, Master,” she corrected, stuttering still.

“Better. You are wetter than a swamp in summer, you dirty slut. Let's fill you with a little more.”

Jocelyn's eyes bugged out when he slipped not a third finger into her but a third and fourth. Stretched, she bucked against his hand, feeling his knees bruising the back of her legs.

“Yes, Master. Fuck me. Fill me.” Her eyes started to glaze, lost in the moment. She imagined this was what his other pets felt like when their eyes seemed dead. They were submersed in the depravity he inflicted on their bodies, on their minds. She was a slut, a whore, a girl who couldn't get enough, couldn't be filled enough.

“Wake up!” he said, slapping her again. “You will stay awake when I'm fucking you.” There was further stretching and Jocelyn screamed. What was tearing her open? It was more than she had ever been spread before, her knees wedged apart by Will's knees to permit the huge object into her.

The further it worked its way into her, the more Jocelyn clamped upon it. The more she came, the more wetness dripped out of her. It wasn't fucking her, it was insistently pushing into her. When it hit her most tender spot inside, she bit down on her tongue and tasted blood. She screamed again as she rocked wildly against Will's hold on her, her climax as high as the highest she'd had in Blue Moon House.

“Softly, kitten,” Will murmured, the huge intrusion retreating. It slid out only slightly faster than it pushed in. Will stroked her hair as he pulled it out. Jocelyn still had no idea what he had fucked her with, something beyond her experience. He put his hand next to her face and she saw her juices glistening on it, the entire hand and part of his wrist.

Her eyes blurred again. Exhaustion adding to her blood-induced lightheadedness. She would think about it in the morning.

She was surprised when Will curled up around her, holding her as she faded into unconsciousness. He almost never stayed. She didn't care. His arms were strong and she was so tired.

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CHAPTER EIGHT – VAMPIRES

“Okay, slut, time to show us what you've got.” Jocelyn cringed at Will's tone. He took such pleasure in abusing her verbally. The fact that she was pushing her limits didn't seem to impress him one bit. She was going to have a man in her anus for the first time since that awful nightmare she couldn't escape.

It wouldn't be Will. She was tremendously grateful for that. He was both thicker and longer than most of her previous lovers. The thought of him trying to push his way into her bowels terrified her.

No, the man would be Philip, one of Sophia's pets, the fifth that she had brought at Will's request. The first two had taken her while tied, the next had fucked her throat. It still shocked her that she was able to handle that. It wasn't something she did by choice, but knowing she could, knowing she allowed it, made the horrors of the past pale. It didn't mean she was safe from ever being raped again, but it meant she wasn't afraid of the pain anymore. It didn't hurt.

Tonight, both Will and Sophia told her, the second barrier would come down. She was so close already. Will had managed to make her climax on his finger using nothing else but his saliva. Granted, that was a potent addition, but no clitoral stimulation, no vaginal—he didn't even fondle her breasts. He simply kissed her, his saliva taking the slow path to her blood, and worked his finger in her ass.

That time it had been a single finger. More didn't hurt, and she didn't fear that either, but it didn't feel as good. Will nodded in understanding, though he didn't explain.

Philip wore a leather collar around his neck. It had a metal loop in it, like a leash for an animal. In her time, Jocelyn had seen many of the people moving between the kitchen or the parlor and their rooms. She'd never seen anything like that on them. One had worn a silver chain like a choker, something similar to the gold one she had on her first visit. That was the only reason she had noticed it. She supposed

that person might have been leashed as well.

Jocelyn's mouth fell open when Sophia released a length of leather that must have attached behind Philip's head. He really was on a leash. A crack broke the silence as Sophia struck him on the back of his legs with the leather.

Jocelyn flinched and stepped closer to Will. He had strapped her a few times when she had been particularly flippant. She knew how much that would have hurt. Oddly, the naked man didn't cry out and his exposed penis rose slightly.

“Face down, bitch,” Will said, pushing her in the direction of her bed. Pausing just long enough to lick her lips in admiration of Philip's hard length, Jocelyn bent obediently. Her breath eased as warm oil was poured down her back. This part was familiar. She could do this.

“Wait,” Will said and Jocelyn turned to look behind her.

Will moved his hand over her, pulling and pushing her clitoris before sinking his fingers into her vagina and pumping them up and down. Jocelyn gripped and bit into the sheets. Ejaculating was no longer a mystery to her and that was exactly what Will wanted.

A splattering splash accompanied the release of pressure in her pelvis. She relaxed her jaw and pushed the sheets out with her tongue. Her fists remained clenched, however. This was it.

Whatever command they gave Philip, it was non-verbal. She had no warning before a thick digit rubbed along her, catching repeatedly on the puckered hole of her anus. Each time he found it, he pushed a little more before sliding off on the oil. Each jump from her anus up her back pinched, snapped or tore. It stung for a second. She'd lost count of how many slips he'd had before he caught and pushed in enough to stay in place.

Her teeth gritted tightly, she let out a high keen, afraid of what would come next.

A hand stroked her hair and she relaxed a little, Philip unmoving behind her. The stroking continued when he pushed again, sliding into her. He stopped after every fraction of an inch, giving her time to expand, to accommodate him.

“Hold,” was whispered one time when he slid further than any

stroke before. His hands on her hips tightened. She had the sense he wanted to pull her back, cover himself in her.

“I said hold,” Sophia repeated. There was a crack, an echo of the one earlier, as she strapped him again.

He twitched inside Jocelyn and she whimpered. The stroking on her hair, once started, hadn't slowed. It had to be Will, Jocelyn realized with surprise. So tender for him.

“That's my kitten,” he murmured.

With the soft words came a sensation Jocelyn had only felt once before, the night Will had teased her with his finger. Philip inside her no longer felt like an intrusion, it felt like something she could squeeze, something good inside her. She lifted her hips slightly, helping him on the next tiny thrust.

“Ugh,” he groaned as he slid again. Jocelyn pushed her hips back and felt his hips against her skin. She'd taken him, completely. Not only had she been able to do it, it felt good!

Laughing in relief, her insides moved around Philip. Too much for him to bear. She felt his hair on her back just before he throbbed inside her, spilling his seed. Jocelyn arched her back, triumphant.

“Good boy,” Sophia told Philip. Jocelyn was able to turn once Philip slipped out to see the vampire petting the human's head. She tied the leash back in place. “Now you can have a reward,” she promised. Before going, she leaned down and hugged Jocelyn.

Jocelyn seized her in a tight embrace, nose tucked under the other woman's ear, breathing in her scent. Was there anything better than Sophia? Certainly no one better to share her victory with.

Sophia pushed her away gently and led Philip back to his room, leaving Jocelyn alone with Will. She wasn't foolish enough to speak, watching him for a response.

“I understand your friend is getting married next week?”

Jocelyn frowned, unsure what this was about. She and Daisy had only been together twice in the five months since Jocelyn had found Blue Moon House, and she hadn't been with Bernard at all. “Yes, sir.”

“You will be without a roommate,” he said.

“Yes, sir,” she answered again.

“You will stay here.” It wasn't an offer. It wasn't a suggestion. It was a command. Like almost everything else that came out of his mouth.

“Yes, sir,” she answered although she giggled at the end.

He kissed the top of her head and hugged her shoulders. “Good kitten. Two more and then me.”

Jocelyn's jubilation was quickly doused in cold water. Only two more men? There was no way she would be ready for Will that soon. She wasn't sure she would be ready for another man. Even now her anus burned a little—no more than after a hard stool, but still, a burn. Will would tear her open.

Her legs were swept out from beneath her and the covers pulled away as well. Will put her down on the exposed sheet and braced himself over her face. “You will be ready,” he told her, his shining black eyes filled with confidence. It made Jocelyn smile.

“Yes, sir.”

“Good kitten. Sleep,” he said, turning down the lamps.

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Jocelyn smiled and hummed as she packed up her belongings. Daisy's were already moved to her new place, so the apartment was looking drearily empty. All that was left—except the furniture belonging to the florist—were a few paintings Jocelyn and Daisy had picked up together.

Daisy set another hatbox atop the stack before pointing to one hanging. “What should we do with those?”

“You aren't going to hang them in your house?” Jocelyn asked, dragging a trunk toward the door.

Daisy shook her head. “Bernard's family have already filled the place with family portraits.” Her nose wrinkled in distaste, making Jocelyn giggle.

“Well, take them anyway. Store them for a year, and when no one's looking, swap out the worst ones.”

Daisy laughed and hugged Jocelyn. “I'm going to miss you,” she murmured, sniffling.

“Oh, stop that. You've been weepy every time I've seen you the last few weeks.” Jocelyn paused, backing up and looking her friend over. “You aren't carrying, are you?” Her eyes glued to Daisy's pelvis left no question what she was asking.

“No. I had a cycle last week, thank you very much.” She turned sullen now, spinning away from Jocelyn to the door. “When are your friends coming?”

“Daisy,” Jocelyn said, striding to the door and putting her hands on her friend's shoulders. “I'm sorry. It is worry over the wedding, isn't it? You're not acting yourself.”

Daisy sighed and turned, twisting some lace on one of her cuffs. Such nervous gestures weren't unknown to Jocelyn, but she hadn't seen any since Daisy had accepted her offer of more than friendship. Their relationship had done wonders for calming Daisy and helping her through difficult times when they arose.

Jocelyn took her hand and held it in both of hers. “Have you talked to Bernard? You can tell him anything you would tell me.”

Daisy smiled weakly. “I know. He just doesn't help the way you did. He listens, but he doesn't have suggestions. When I tell him about the latest task his mother has dropped atop the pile, he just nods and says she's always been that way.”

Jocelyn squeezed Daisy's fingers. “You'll be fine. Tell him what you need from him. Especially if that's for him to talk to his mother. No sense making waves there if you don't have to.”

Daisy nodded. “You're right. I think he has. She's been more cooperative lately.”

“There, see? Now what have you to worry about?”

“Everyone,” she answered. “I'm sure someone is going to know about-”

Daisy didn't finish her sentence, but Jocelyn knew she was referring to their relationship. They were interrupted by a knock at the door.

“You were looking for a serving man, ma'am?”

Jocelyn's jaw dropped. Will had said he'd make sure someone came to help her move her things to a carriage for transport to the House. He hadn't said he'd be doing it himself! He was dressed in rough

clothing, though each piece seemed just a bit too small for his large frame. The effect made him seem both larger and less wealthy. They seemed to imply he couldn't afford clothes that fit.

“Y-yes,” Jocelyn stuttered. “Those boxes, there. Are you sure you-”

He cut her off. “Won't take more than a minute, ma'am.” He tipped his frayed cap to her. Jocelyn's stomach seemed to writhe with the discontinuity of seeing Will acting servile. This was the man who called her a whore, who treated her like a slave of his own.

“Jocelyn?” Daisy asked, paying Will no further mind. “I'm sure someone knows.”

Jocelyn shook her head, trying to block the images that Will's appearance had spawned in her mind. Him as a slave, his cheeks red from beating, calling him a worm. She shouldn't be thinking it. She couldn't correlate it with the man she'd come to know. Instead she focused on Daisy's warm brown eyes, filled with fear.

Jocelyn smiled and stroked her hand again. “No one knows. We were roommates. No one will imagine we were anything more.”

“How can you be sure?”

“Are Mrs. White and Miss Burns more than roommates?” The dowager and old maid had lived together longer than Jocelyn had been in town.

“Of course not, they- They are? Really?” Daisy asked in shock.

Jocelyn laughed loudly, holding her sides. “You see? Unless you are looking for it, you don't see it.” She wrapped an arm around Daisy's shoulders and turned her to the door. Will had just returned, opening the door to the darkening sky outside. The sun still topped the horizon in the west though it would be fully set soon. He ducked his head and shoulders, bowing to the pair. Jocelyn, confused, hurried Daisy along.

“I'll be fine from here, Daisy. You head home. You have a wedding to prepare.” She gave her friend a nudge to start her walking.

“Yes, I should. Bernard will worry. Thank you, Jocelyn.” Daisy hugged her tightly once more before descending the staircase.

Closing the door behind her, Jocelyn whirled on Will, who held her steamer trunk by it's two large handles.

“What are you doing?” she asked, her voice nearly screeching.

He set the trunk down and laughed. “Helping you move in, of course.”

“How is it you are here during the day? Doesn't that...” she gestured at him, lost for words. “Isn't that bad for vampires?”

“Bad, yes.” He took off his cap, and in the lamplight Jocelyn could see that his cheeks were much pinker than she remembered. “It burns, but it's nearly gone, and it would be less odd for me to move you at dusk than after dark.”

She couldn't argue with that, but started to when he lifted the trunk again. “Isn't that heavy?”

He laughed hard enough to drop the trunk to the floor and braced himself on it. “Heavy. Even when I was human this was only barely heavy. I had to carry much more, much farther than down your single flight of stairs. But now?” He laughed harder. “I could carry three like this without strain.”

Jocelyn frowned. “Well, I didn't know that,” she snapped, ripping her hat from the stand that belonged to the suite. Pinning it in her hair, she opened the door forcefully. “Don't break anything,” she said haughtily. “I'll have you whipped.” The imperious effect was ruined by her snort. His echoed.

“You will pay for that,” he warned her, following her down the stairs.

“Of that, I have no doubt,” she agreed, her smug grin opening to a full smile. There was room for her among her bags in the carriage but she climbed up beside Will in the drivers' seat. Even Will's promise of chastisement couldn't ruin the happiness of this day. “So when do I get to be a vampire?” she asked. She had been dreaming of it through these months. She'd been letting go of her humanity as she let her friend go toward her marriage.

Will's hands tightened on the reins and the rented draft team slowed. “You get ahead of yourself, kitten,” he said quietly, looking around. “And you might want to be careful using that word.”

Jocelyn pressed her lips together and starting searching the street, too. She hadn't meant to cause a stir.

Will proceeded to answer her foolish question. “You haven't come

that far. There are a few more hurdles for you."

"Like?" she asked, sitting back on the padded leather seat.

"More than one man."

She waved that away with a hand. "I've done that."

"Not the way I mean," he said. "Neither in your mouth," he clarified.

Jocelyn froze. Even that fateful night, they hadn't been so depraved as that. They took turns with her, sometimes the on-lookers would spray her with seed, but not...

"Is that even possible?" she asked in a whisper.

"You're the biologist. You tell me," he said, grinning.

Both muscles were able to stretch, but both at once?

"Why is that a requirement?" she asked, frustrated. "I didn't see either Lynn or Sophia-"

"Do not shine light on your dark mistakes." His voice rumbled and roared.

Jocelyn immediately snapped her mouth shut. He was right. She wasn't supposed to have been there, seen that. When she was about to ask something else, just to break the silence, he answered.

"You would offer yourself to us. You should be prepared for how we might take you." And now, the image wasn't depravity, as it would have been being torn open by two men. Now it was a way of claiming her, a way of two of them enjoying her at once. On those ominous words, the last of the sun set and Will sat a little straighter, pushing his cap back. "Don't worry. There is no rush."

"Says you," Jocelyn muttered. She wanted Sophia and it seemed becoming one of the vampires was the only way she was going to get her. In a louder voice she said, "I imagine this means you'll be bringing another pet to me."

"Yes, one of mine," he said, pulling the team to a stop outside Blue Moon House. He hopped down, offering her a hand. Once she was on the ground, he handed her a stack of hatboxes.

She pursed her lips. "Appearances?" she asked.

"Be a good kitten and carry your boxes. Be glad I don't make you carry more," he warned.

Jocelyn's mood still couldn't sour. She trotted up to the door. Her new home.

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CHAPTER NINE – BEDDING

“Jocelyn, tell me what it's for,” Daisy begged.

Jocelyn shook her head. “You wouldn't understand.” She worked the pedal of the machine while pushing a narrow band from the giant piece of fabric through.

Daisy flounced into a chair in the parlor. You wouldn't know it was Jocelyn's first visit since the wedding. It was as though they hadn't been apart more than a few days rather than weeks. “I thought you were coming to see me,” she complained.

Jocelyn chuckled, continuing to feed material under the needle. “I did come to see you. I only need your machine for a few minutes. It's nothing difficult. There.” She pulled the last corner and used the nearby shears to snip the threads. Taking the shears and the fabric with her, she sat in another chair.

“Tell me all about married life,” she said with a grin. Her eyes would dart from her hands, where she cut small gaps along the newly stitched edge, to Daisy and back. “Is Bernard more or less attentive than before?”

Daisy sighed loudly. “Less. Well, that's not true. He's just as attentive at night, but during the day he is nowhere to be found.” She kicked out her skirt and crossed her ankles. “His job is more important than me.”

Jocelyn laughed again. “Well, he does need to work, Daisy.”

“I know, but I didn't expect him to stay so late each night.”

Jocelyn put down the shears long enough to touch her friend's knee. “At least you'll have someone new to fill your days,” she said, smiling. Jocelyn pulled out a piece of bleached twine and began threading it through the series of slits she had made, using the openings to help her pull the long piece through.

“True,” Daisy agreed, patting her belly, which hadn't started showing yet. She'd only missed one cycle. “You really won't tell me

what it is?" she asked, picking up one edge of the giant piece.

"It's a bed sheet," she answered.

Daisy let the fabric fall to the floor again. "You're not serious. A bed this big?" she asked.

"Well, it will be."

"Is it for a giant to sleep on?"

"Sure," Jocelyn said, dodging the question. She couldn't talk about Blue Moon House or the vampires that shared the disjointed furniture in their bedroom.

She had done everything Will had asked, and in return she had been allowed to observe them one night. She was close to joining them. Will still claimed her, but she was becoming frustrated. He had really pushed her as far as he could. The things that had appalled her, things she had balked at, she was willing to indulge in now. Some, like anal sex, she rarely chose for herself, but if that was what her partner was interested in, she was happy to share in his pleasure.

That was something else that had changed. She didn't seek her own pleasure any longer, didn't try to sway men to her desires. Before, that would be in the forefront of every encounter, what did she want out of this engagement? Now she sought to achieve whatever her partner wanted.

Daisy yawned and Jocelyn started sweeping the expansive sheet together and stuffing it back in the basket she had brought it in.

"I didn't mean to come so late," Jocelyn apologized. "Thank you for letting me use your machine," she said, hugging her friend who hadn't risen.

"You don't have to go," she said, holding tight to Jocelyn's neck. "You could come upstairs for a while."

Jocelyn leaned her forehead into Daisy's. "I can't, love. You have a life here and I wouldn't do anything to jeopardize that."

"You wouldn't be," Daisy insisted, holding Jocelyn's cheeks and kissing her. "Bernard's the only one who will know, and he does already. Please stay?" she asked, her finger sliding under Jocelyn's collar, along her neckline. "Just a little longer."

She wasn't expected in the House tonight as she had classes in the

morning. It was one of the reasons she had come today. Letting her basket fall, she moved into Daisy's lap, hand running up her side and cupping a breast.

“I don't have to go,” Jocelyn said, her finger teasing a nipple until it hardened. “I haven't had a girl in ages.”

Daisy, head tipped back, surprised. “You haven't?”

Jocelyn shook her head, continuing to draw on Daisy. “The men have been very nice, though,” she said with a smile.

Daisy chuckled. “I bet they were. You have any new tricks to show me?”

Jocelyn's finger stopped moving as she recalled a sudden flash of heat, a spray of moisture. Could she give that to Daisy? Would it be bad for the baby? Relaxing, she started teasing again. The baby should be fine. Assuming she could replicate what the vampires had done to her. “There might be.” Pulling on the ribbon tying Daisy's dress closed at her neck, Jocelyn reached in and pulled free one of her breasts.

“Why do I think this is one of Bernard's favorite dresses?” she asked, leaning down to lick Daisy's rosy nipple.

“God, those are tender.” Daisy complained, leaning back into her chair again. “Yes, he likes it very much.”

“I can imagine. Like all men,” Jocelyn slid from Daisy's lap to sit on the floor at her feet, “I appreciate skirts.” Reaching up under Daisy's, she scratched her nails along the inside of her calf and thigh.

“Yes,” Daisy agreed. “So easy to...” She reached down, but Jocelyn swatted her hand away.

“Sit on those,” she told her friend.

“Why?”

“Just do it,” Jocelyn insisted, looking up at Daisy with a wide grin. “Trust me.”

Daisy lifted herself just enough to wedge her hands under her. After she had, Jocelyn pushed up her skirt, exposing Daisy's stockings.

“It's been so long, Jocy,” Daisy complained, shifting down in the chair.

“I know,” Jocelyn agreed, inhaling Daisy's familiar musk. Her hands slid along the top of her thighs, spreading them as wide as the chair

allowed. Kissing the inside of the right, she made her way to Daisy's hairy sex, glistening with beads of moisture. “You didn't tell me you were so eager,” she teased, burying her lips and nose in the dark curls.

“Ah! I-I didn't realize I was. Mmm. It's something about you, Jocy. Something that calls me.”

“I'll have to come calling, then,” she teased, her tongue darting out to flick Daisy.

“Don't make me wait, please,” she begged.

“I won't,” Jocelyn promised. “I'm going to show you something new,” she promised, unbuttoning her cuff blindly while she kissed and sucked on Daisy's red and engorged lips. “You taste better than ever. What are you doing differently?”

“N-nothing. M-maybe the baby?” she stuttered, her breath coming faster.

“Maybe,” Jocelyn agreed. “Make sure you have another.”

Daisy laughed. “I think that's the plan.”

“Good.” Jocelyn pushed up her sleeve and slipped two fingers into Daisy while continuing to suckle her lips and clitoris.

As soon as she thrust them in, Daisy began squeezing on Jocelyn's fingers, squirming around them.

“Hold still,” she said, backing up enough to put her hand on Daisy's hip and hold her down. Then she moved her fingers as she remembered Will and Sophia doing, up and down against the soft place that seemed to harden and throb.

“Damnation!” Daisy cursed as her legs shook wildly. Jocelyn didn't move aside and the wash that erupted from her friend drenched her sleeve and splashed her bodice. Grinning, she dove back between Daisy's thighs to clean what was left.

Daisy tossed side to side and managed to free her hands, pushing Jocelyn back. “What was that?”

“Something new,” she said with a smirk.

“Your turn.” Using the advantage of her larger size, Daisy pushed Jocelyn onto her back on the floor. Flipping back her skirt, Daisy paused again. “What have you done?” she asked, her hand brushing tentatively over the smooth skin exposed by Will's razor.

“They like it this way,” she explained. Pulling a hair from her tongue, Jocelyn was reminded why. “It's ever so sensitive.”

Daisy continued to explore with her fingers. “I've never seen it so clearly before. We truly are beautiful, aren't we?” She leaned down to kiss the top of Jocelyn's mound and then drew her tongue down along the wet slit.

“Mmm, yes. I certainly think so.”

The sound of the door opening didn't stir either of them and soon Jocelyn was looking at Bernard from her spot on the floor.

“Hello,” she said, smiling.

“Hello, Jocelyn.” He moved to his wife's side, pulling her hair out of the way to kiss her neck while she sucked on Jocelyn. “Hello, my love. You look especially ravishing today.”

Jocelyn moaned with the sudden change in Daisy's efforts. “She says thank you,” she told Bernard. “And so do I.”

“Yes? Thankful enough to...” he began opening his trousers, crawling to Jocelyn's face.

She reached up and finished the job, pulling him free. “Definitely,” she said, stroking his length and pulling him toward her mouth. “Hands and knees,” she suggested, taking hold of his hips to direct him.

Lying back, she opened her throat and let him spill down into it while Daisy continued to lick and bite her.

Bernard was surprised at first, but after the first stroke in her throat, understood something had changed. “God, Jocelyn, you never used to do that.”

She hummed around him, unable to answer.

“She has learned all sorts of new things,” Daisy told him.

She set about showing both of them just how many.

***

She had stayed long, trying many new things with Daisy and Bernard. In a way, she was also saying goodbye. Now that she lived in the House, she was sure it was just a matter of time before she joined

them as a vampire. She'd spent the last two months slowly separating from Daisy, first with the apartment, then the wedding. This was just one more goodbye. Like several she had had to say before.

Will was sitting on her bed when she arrived.

“Were you expecting me?” she asked, setting her basket down. “This isn't one of the nights we usually-”

Her field of vision turned red and she would be on the floor if her spin hadn't sent her to the bed. Instead, she leaned on it heavily, wondering what she had done wrong.

“Who is in control?” he asked, putting one large hand on her back, holding her to the sheets.

“You are,” she said, worried. He had handled her roughly, but never as spontaneously as this.

“Who are you here for?”

That was an odd question. “For me.”

“Then why aren't you here? Why are you with others, sharing our secrets?”

“I didn't!” She was quick to defend herself. “They know nothing they didn't before. That this is a house of sex, nothing more.” She trembled, afraid. This was dangerous territory. They would ban her in a heartbeat, she was certain.

Will grunted. Then with his hand still on her back, he flipped her skirt up and over her back. The cold air made goosebumps break out on her legs.

“Nice and wet,” he commented, his free hand exploring. One probed her ass. Both Daisy and Bernard had been shocked when she suggested that. “Here too. Perfect.” Both hands pressed into her back and she felt a thick bar sliding up her slit.

“No!” she argued. “Not you. I can't-”

One hand wrapped around her cheek and Will's fingers filled her mouth. “Quiet. You can and you will. Every hole can take me.” He shifted behind her, his cock slipping until it found her anus. It was still slick with the oil Bernard had used.

Jocelyn tensed, preparing for pain. Nothing came, nothing happened, Will held perfectly still, his fingers still curled in her

mouth. She let out a sigh of relief and he pushed.

Biting into his fingers, Jocelyn's scream was muffled. Will didn't punish her or take his fingers back, but he did slide them around her mouth. She tasted sweet stickiness, his blood. He pulled them out a little and pushed them back in. As he did, he rocked his hips forward, sinking further into her. She felt herself spread, but no burning, no pain, just intense fullness.

Relieved, she started sucking on his fingers, teasing them with her tongue and pulling them further into her mouth.

“You are the whore, aren't you, my little bubber?”

She laughed, as she did every time he called her that. It was amazing how that relaxed her, how much better he felt sliding in and out of her. She laughed again, having trouble believing it.

“You think it's funny, bitch? You think my cock in your ass is funny?”

She laughed again. “Yes! I think your ramrod in my barrel is pretty funny.”

Will was silent for a moment, but then Jocelyn felt his hand tremble. He let go of her, pulling free and standing up as waves of laughter came from him. “Ramrod, barrel. Ha Ha.”

Jocelyn sighed in relief when his girth was removed. She rolled over to look at the man she had once feared holding his sides as he laughed. “Please! That's nothing compared to leaving my shit in your pisspot.” He'd said that before.

He shook his head as he continued to laugh. “No, no, this is better.”

“Really?” she asked. “How about using your crowbar to pry my legs apart?”

Will actually slapped his knee. “Yes! Yes! I'm using that one.”

Jocelyn rolled her eyes. “For an educated man, you are easily amused.”

Will snorted and Jocelyn couldn't help but start laughing again with him.

“What's going on in here?” Lynn asked from the door.

Will waved her in. “We're just exchanging poor word choices. Tell her,” he insisted, wiping tears from his eyes.

“I just said that I found his ramrod in my barrel funny.”

Lynn's shining brown eyes bugged for a moment before she started laughing, too. “Oh no. He's been calling you his bubber, hasn't he? I swear he never grows up and he is constantly showing his age.”

Will slid around Jocelyn to lie on his back, catching his breath. “Oh, that was good. So, what kept you out so late tonight? We missed you.”

Lynn joined Jocelyn on the bed too, stroking her hair where it spilled out under her hat. That was ready to fall off and the pin was poking her in the scalp. She pulled it free and tossed it in the direction of the wardrobe. It bounced off and landed on the rug. “We?” she asked.

“Yes,” Lynn answered. “We were going to reward you again tonight.” Her lips closed on Jocelyn's earlobe, her breath and her sucking working together to make Jocelyn's heart race.

“I'm very sorry I was late,” she murmured, turning to face Lynn and kiss her.

“It's not too late,” Lynn said, her hands running over Jocelyn's thigh through her skirt. “There's still time.” Her kiss implied that the reward would be delivered right here. Jocelyn was happy if that were the case.

Sadly, a few moments later, Lynn rose to follow Will out the door. Jocelyn lay for a moment, confused. Then, a little upset, she picked up her basket and followed them.

As she expected, at least one vampire was in a room downstairs. The cries of their partner spilled into the hall. There was no sign of Lynn or Will. Frowning, Jocelyn made her way to the stairs, gift on her hip. There was something different tonight, but she wasn't sure what.

She opened the door without any pretence of stealth. They could hear her, she knew. When the door swung into the room, she put her finger on what had bothered her a moment ago. It was quiet in the room.

Five vampires lounged in various places around the room, all facing the door.

“You were expecting me?” she asked, surprised.

“We had planned to invite you,” Will said, “but this late at night, we weren't sure you would still join us.”

“Even after all that down in my room?” she asked, raising an eyebrow. “Did I look like I was going to sleep?”

“No,” Lynn said, smiling. “And I had hoped you wouldn't. Join me?” she asked, pushing herself back onto the bed she sat on the edge of. “Terrance? Join us?”

“Wait!” Jocelyn said in excitement. “I have something. Terrance, can you push that bed toward this one?” She directed the vampires as they easily shifted furniture about, shoving the beds to abut one another.

When it was ready, Jocelyn pulled out her surprise, letting it float over the mattresses.

“A sheet?” Sophia asked, taking one of the far corners to help Jocelyn stretch it over the bed.

“Yes. I thought it was silly for you to keep breaking into groups when it seemed obvious none of you wanted that. Now, you'll have one bed big enough for everyone.” She pulled the twine inserted in the edge and fitted the sheet. “There. Perfect.” She smoothed a crease and stepped back, sitting in one of the chairs where she could touch herself and watch them play. She started hiking up her skirt, waiting.

The vampires, less Harry who must be downstairs, all regarded one another. Then Will picked her up and dropped her on the bed. Perching on her hands and knees, she looked around at them. “What?”

“Remove that,” Sophia said, pointing at Jocelyn’s dress. “I don't want it in my way.”

Will obliged, pulling it up and popping buttons to tear it free. Jocelyn curled up a little at the sudden attack. Will and Sophia weren't alone, however. Nicholas licked his lips and dove for her side, biting into her neck. Terrance took hold of her face, turning her toward his crotch. Will was lifting her again, and she felt feminine hands on her legs though she could see nothing but Terrance standing erect from a bush of pale curls. She opened her mouth, unsure she could satiate them all at once. She was more than willing to try.

Nicholas continued to ravish her neck, drinking heavily and allowing the aphrodisiac to do its work. She felt another set of teeth pierce her thigh and turned from Terrance to see Lynn lapping at the red pooling on her skin. More of the intoxicating chemical surged through her veins and she felt her sex growing hot, wet and needy. It wasn't left for long. Will curled behind her and rammed his whole length into her, making her head wobble when he hit her cervix. Terrance's penis, a drop on the end, touched the side of her nose, leaving a wet smear. Moving her head only slightly, she was able to take him in her mouth while Nicholas and Will surrounded her torso. Her hips and thighs belonged to Lynn and Sophia, one still feeding, the other licking at her clit.

Jocelyn moaned and writhed, but was held in place by a wall of flesh surrounding her. She lost track of who was straddling her face, but she was sure each one had taken a turn. It seemed each had taken a turn everywhere, especially feeding. She was lightheaded when Harry arrived, so she wasn't sure he had joined them or she just imagined it. She only knew that shortly after she thought she saw him, the room turned black.

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CHAPTER TEN – CHANGES

Jocelyn didn't make it to class the next day. She didn't leave the overlarge bed. Waking very groggily, she was immediately seized by Sophia.

“You're alive,” she murmured.

Jocelyn chuckled. “Yes. Ow. My head hurts, but the rest of me seems fine.” She looked down at her painless extremities and tried lifting one, her hand. It moved very sluggishly. “Uh, I think you drank too much.” She had a fit of silent giggles. Usually this feeling was reserved for when she drank too much, but she hadn't touched alcohol last night. Neither had her companions.

“What should we do?” Sophia asked, obviously worried.

“Hmm.” Jocelyn's brain was as sluggish as everything else. Blood loss, blood loss...”Bring me water. No, wait,” she stopped Sophia who was already at the door. “Juice. Later, broth.”

Sophia was gone and back in moments. “Here.” She held Jocelyn's back as she sipped the apple juice Sophia held to her lips. It was unbelievable how terrible Jocelyn felt. “You're sure there isn't anything else? We can't...give you blood?” Sophia asked, grasping.

“No. I wouldn't want to try a transfusion, thank you.” She didn't want to direct them through something that complicated in her current state.

“You could have our blood.” Sophia offered her wrist. “It might help?”

Jocelyn's eyes went wide. “But I might become a vampire,” she said.

Sophia smiled. “We would like that, actually.” She dropped her hand to take and squeeze Jocelyn's “We decided that last night. You have all the time in the world to decide whether that's what you want. Unless you think you won't make it through this,” Sophia said, worry in her eyes again. “If you're going to die anyway-”

“No,” Jocelyn said, pulling her hand free and waving it. “No, not dying. Just...very, very dizzy.”

“Good,” Sophia said. “Then I'm going to tell the others. You don't think any more about it until you're on your feet.”

“Yes,” Jocelyn said, her voice a croak. “I don't think that will be for a while yet.”

Sophia kissed her forehead. “Sleep, kitten. You are safe here.”

Jocelyn curled up like the cat they named her and drifted back to sleep.

She stayed in that bed for three days, surprised when the others came to curl around her throughout the day and night. None did more than caress her skin, despite her fondling of them, until she pushed herself up and made her way to the water closet.

It dawned on her that she hadn't urinated in days. Wincing, what she finally expelled burned and smelled terrible. Dehydration. Well, that wouldn't be a problem any longer. She'd had a constant supply of fluids. After that, she located the bath, and with a little help from Harry, moved it to her room downstairs. Together they filled it while she nibbled on whatever she could find in the kitchen. Only after she was rested, fed and cleaned did she ask the questions that had been plaguing her since Sophia told her they wanted her to be a vampire.

“What's it like?” she asked Harry, who sat with her in her room.

“What?”

“Becoming one of you.”

His expression turned dark. “It is a terrible experience. Death by drowning.”

“Death? But you're alive,” she said, putting her hand to his throat to verify what she had been sure she heard and felt. A steady pulse, perhaps a little fast.

“I am, but I was dead, for a whole day. When the sun sets...something brings us back. If we've done it right.”

“You mean, I might simply die?” she asked, appalled at that news.

Harry nodded. “It's possible, but you won't. The instructions are simple and one of us will be with you to supervise.”

Jocelyn shifted uncomfortably. “So what else do I have to do?

Besides drinking?"

"Nothing. The danger lies in not drinking enough. You drain us as we did you, to the point of death. You had us all scared." Harry rested his forehead on hers. It felt oddly familial. She didn't have any brothers and only one sister that she didn't keep in touch with, especially since their mother had passed.

"I'm fine now," she reminded him, drawing a finger up his arm toward his shoulder and neck. "Will I change much?"

"Your eyes will be the biggest change, but there are others. The obvious ones are speed and strength."

She nodded. Watching them she knew that much. Her eyes were green. What would they look like, she wondered.

"Will I be able to survive without blood?" she asked. She hadn't really thought about how they lived.

"Not really. You'll become very weak. You can eat food just as you do now, but it doesn't fill you any longer."

That didn't sound too bad. "What else do I need to know?"

"You'll need an experienced pet for your first feeding. You'll be very thirsty and likely to take too much. I nearly killed mine," he said, his face turning dark.

Jocelyn nodded, logging that fact with the others. "How soon can we do it?"

Harry's head came up, eyes wide. "You're sure?"

She shrugged. "It's what I've wanted since my first night here. Since the first time I saw all of you upstairs. I want this. I want her."

"Her?" Harry asked, his eyebrow lifting. "Would you be referring to our head Mistress?"

Jocelyn felt herself blush and looked into her lap. "Yes. Sophia. She's attracted me since she met me at the door that first day. For a while, it seemed all I did was disappoint her. I'm glad that's not the case any longer."

Harry took her hand, which was teasing a snagged thread in her robe, and squeezed it. "Not at all. She's proud of you. She talks of you all the time!" he said, looking to the ceiling. "How you're doing so well. Is Will sure he's handling you right. Is he sure you're improving.

Does he want her to watch. She has a boy that would be perfect for you. On and on. Some nights it's painfully annoying."

Each word made Jocelyn brighten more. "Really?" she asked, a wide grin on her lips. "She really talks about me?"

Harry shook his head. "I'm going to get her. She's the one who can answer your questions best."

As soon as he left, Jocelyn ran to the water closet and the mirror inside. She was clean, rosy cheeked, and her hair was still damp on her back. There were dark circles beneath her eyes that made her frown. Her cheeks seemed more hollow too. She'd have to eat to make up the loss.

Convinced she look as good as she could, she climbed onto the bed, lounging with her legs exposed.

"Hello, kitten. I hear you're asking curious questions?" Sophia paused very slightly in the sentence, obviously taking in Jocelyn's appearance.

"Yes, I wanted to know how soon I could become one of you." Jocelyn let her gaze roam over the other woman, her thick black locks, her tiny waist, those amazing sapphire eyes. "I would very much like that."

Sophia drew a line up one of Jocelyn's legs, dragging her finger slowly as she neared the middle. Jocelyn thought she might lift her hips if Sophia didn't finish that tease.

"You are sure? You want to be with us forever?" Sophia's lips, slightly cooler than Jocelyn's, kissed the skin on the edge of her robe. Jocelyn shifted down, making the silk push up. Sophia's smile grew and she kissed the newly exposed skin, her lips moving over the stubble growing on Jocelyn's sex. Will would probably shave her again before long.

Curious, she braced herself on her elbows and sat up straighter. "Do I still belong to Will?"

Sophia chuckled, pulling open the tie on Jocelyn's robe. "You were never Will's. He was in charge of you, but you always owned yourself."

It was obvious when put that way. However, it didn't answer her

questions. “Is he still in charge of me?”

Sophia kissed her way up the center of Jocelyn's chest, making the girl arch her back and fall to the pillows. “No. Your lessons are over.”

Jocelyn chuckled. She would always be the student. Running her fingers through Sophia's dark waves, the vampire broke the skin of her breast.

Her fingers contracted, scraping on Sophia's scalp and tugging her hair. “Careful,” she said. “I'm newly healed.”

“Just a scratch,” Sophia assured her. The scratch had the desired effect and Jocelyn began rubbing herself on Sophia's thigh while the vampire kissed her, their tongues meeting in Jocelyn's mouth.

“Oh, God, Sophia.” Jocelyn's language was limited and her words clipped as pleasure rushed her brain. Sophia seemed as eager as Jocelyn, shifting until breasts touched, swaying together in time to Jocelyn's thrusts.

“Yes, Jocelyn. Anything.”

“Make me like you,” she begged through ragged breaths. “I want to be like you.”

“We will, kitten. Very soon.”

After bringing Sophia to climax, and reaching the same twice on her own, Jocelyn was ready to ask more questions. “Who will I drink?”

“Whomever you like,” Sophia answered, holding Jocelyn's head on her bare breast and stroking her still damp curls. They weren't damp from the bath any longer.

“Whom should I choose?”

Sophia didn't stop caressing. “Someone you want to share a moment of pain with. You may get pleasure when we drink your blood, but the same is not true when you drink ours.”

“I have nothing in my saliva,” she surmised. That made sense. “Then why would you do it? It seems an impractical way to procreate, to have to kill your predecessor.”

Sophia kissed the top of Jocelyn's head. “Ever the scientist. I suppose it was in part to limit our numbers. It is also a means of ensuring the strong survive.”

Jocelyn had heard theories about life selecting the strongest for future generations, but she hadn't thought about it this concretely. “That makes a kind of sense,” she agreed. “So I will nearly kill someone. Can it be Will?” she asked brightly, the thought of reciprocating some of the pain visited on her was appealing.

Sophia chuckled. “Yes, any one of us. It will be quite intimate.”

“Then can I choose you?” She turned her head to look up at the vampire.

Sophia took one slow breath. “I suppose. Normally I supervise to ensure there are no accidents.”

“Make certain I drink enough.”

Sophia nodded. “Exactly. However, Nicholas can do as well as I.” The fingers that had stopped at the suggestion of choosing Sophia started moving again. “Is that what you would like?”

“Yes,” Jocelyn murmured, her eyes drifting shut. “I'd love to drink you forever.”

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It was only days later that Sophia was bound with leather cuffs connected by a chain. Jocelyn had no family to worry when she disappeared and only a few friends she kept in close contact with. She had told Daisy and the others that she was traveling to visit her sister. They wouldn't wonder where she was for months. Jocelyn Turner would disappear overnight. She hadn't made any strong ties after breaking with Daisy. No one would miss her dearly.

Nicholas put a razor in Jocelyn's hand. “It might be easier than biting,” he suggested. “It will definitely be less painful for Sophia.”

Jocelyn took the blade gratefully. She and Sophia were both naked, Nicholas the only one in any clothing.

“Remember,” he said, squeezing her hand around the knife. “Drink until you feel yourself about to vomit.”

Jocelyn nodded and turned to Sophia, bound hand to foot. Jocelyn fell to her knees and then snaked on her belly. Sophia was on her knees on the floor and Jocelyn slid between them, flipping onto her

back once she was in place. Here, Jocelyn was able to make the cut where she wanted, next to Sophia's clitoris. The vampire gasped, but didn't cry out, didn't flinch. The cut was clean and small.

Sucking and licking, Jocelyn lapped up the milky pink blood that tasted sweet. When the dripping stopped, she used her tongue on Sophia's sex, lapping her other fluids before using the knife to open the wound anew. The blend of the two was intoxicating. Jocelyn's hand dropped the knife and strayed to touching herself when Sophia's panting and groaning made her own desire flare. Bringing herself to climax, she grimaced and picked up the knife again. Although Sophia let out nothing more than mutters, the way her legs shook spoke of her pain.

It took longer to fill herself than she expected. It was probably because they hadn't let her eat all day. Sophia's legs shook so hard that only the chains holding her kept her upright. Still Jocelyn drank, trying to block out the cries of pain and only notice those of pleasure. She did everything she could to add pleasure to that pain, to make it more bearable, but anytime she hesitated, Nicholas would kick her foot gently to remind her to continue.

After long hours, it was enough. Jocelyn's tongue felt rough from licking so long. Her body felt heavy with exhaustion. She needed to get into bed, but had forgotten why.

Nicholas checked Sophia briefly. The vampire appeared unconscious, but Jocelyn didn't know if they could lose consciousness. After releasing Sophia and ensuring her safety, he picked Jocelyn up and set her on the bed. Then he began tying her ankles to her wrists.

Jocelyn didn't argue but had to strive to remember why he was restraining her. She would fight. It would feel like she was drowning and she would thrash and grab and scrape, digging her fingers into anything and everything to try and claw her way out. So for her safety, as well as that of everyone around her, she would be bound. Once she was dead, the ties would come off and the other vampires would join them. Jocelyn, however, would see and feel nothing until evening.

When the burning started, Jocelyn was thankful for the rope. When

it lasted more than a moment, becoming worse with each passing second, she prayed for oblivion, for the quiet emptiness that came when they drank too much. It didn't come. She clutched at anything she could reach, wishing she could remove what blocked her nose and mouth.

Her chest bursting in agony, Jocelyn finally found peace. It was dark, and cold.

She opened her eyes and found six pairs looking down at her.

“Excellent,” Terrance said, “she's up. I'm going back to Beth.” He touched her knee lightly before leaving.

“How do you feel?” Sophia asked.

“Ready to be in charge of someone else for a while.”

Sophia's grin grew. “You are in the right place.”

Jocelyn followed Sophia to another room where one of her pets awaited them, now Jocelyn's pet.

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Blue Moon House: Gentleman

CHAPTER ONE – PEACH HOUSE

Crack!

Harrold sucked breath through his teeth. The belt was his own, removed from the trousers he still wore. His shirt formed a white pool in the corner and his black jacket hung from the bedpost.

Crack. Creak.

The wood of the bedpost groaned as Harrold pulled on the hemp rope securing his hands on the other side. However, he fought the pain and the desire to scream.

Crack!

The burning intensified and a scream erupted, echoing off the walls. He heard the door open and looked over his shoulder, panting as the pain leaked away.

“Still alive in here?” the mistress of the house asked. She clicked her tongue. “You broke the skin, Miranda. I'm sorry, sir. I'll bring bandages.”

The girl dropped the belt in a clatter, running to untie his hands. Her normally dusky complexion was white with red lines tracking her cheeks.

Harrold seized her hands as soon as his were free. “I asked. You did nothing wrong. Thank you.”

“I-I can't do this, Harry. I'm not- I'm weak.”

He smiled, brown eyes dancing in relief and joy. “Your arm felt strong a minute ago.”

She squeaked and more tears fell.

“Go collect yourself, Miranda,” Delores, the Madam, ordered. Cool wet cloths were spread on his back. “Mister Long, that is the third girl you've made a blubbering mess.”

“If I must, I'll find another house.” There were several brothels that would be glad of his business.

“Actually, I have a woman I'd like you to meet.”

Harrold turned to look at Delores. He'd been frequenting her whores for nearly three years. “A new one?”

“Not mine. Her name is Lynn. How serious are you about this, Harrold?”

Harrold had asked the girls to call him Harry —and worse things— in their bedrooms, but Delores had only ever called him Mister Long or sir.

“Serious about what?”

“The abasement, the pain. Are you sure they are what you want?”

He thought about Veronica, her icy eyes and fingers, the way she called him Harrold and Husband as though he were just another object. No fire, no passion in Veronica, just constant demands. She wore him down faster than a belt could, but gave him no release at the end. Erosion, not a landslide. A low simmer instead of a raging boil.

“It's not enough, Delores. It simply isn't enough.” He might lie with one of her girls but, without this first, it was empty. Hollow.

Delores rubbed cream into his burned wrists, erasing the marks from the ropes. “Then you should meet with her. Come again Thursday. She'll be here then.”

“Who is she?” he asked.

“Have you heard of Blue Moon House?”

Harrold frowned. All of the whorehouses had names. This was Peach House; down the block were Rose House and Black Tea House. He'd never heard of one called Blue Moon, though.

“You are about to be initiated,” Delores said, collecting her things. She picked up his belt as she put things away.

“Initiated? What kind of whores are they?”

“They are not whores. They will take your money, should you give it, but ask for nothing except obedience. You would be a slave to them.”

“And pay for the privilege?” he asked amused.

“Yes, for they know exquisite torture. I was once in the House. That is

why I can invite Lynn. The House is secret, Harrold. It is only for those who want what they offer, who want this." She brought the leather of his belt down on his thigh, making him wince.

"I'll be back on Thursday," he agreed.

"Shall I find someone for you?"

"There seems to be someone here." He smiled at Delores. She was several years older than him, perhaps even a decade, but her body still fit the mold her corset made for it. Harrold reached for the laces hanging from the base of it.

Crack. Harrold's hand snapped back. The erection that had been flagging rose again in his trousers.

"You think to touch me, sir? You think I'm still one of these girls for you to take on your knee?"

Crack. Harrold shuddered, sinking to his knees.

"Yes, kneel for me, gentle sir. Show me how low I can bring you."

Crack.

"Kiss my slipper."

Had he known, he'd have approached Delores sooner. This. This is what he wanted, what he needed. The freedom to be as low and as vile as he could. To be the opposite of what filled his days.

On his hands and knees, he put his lips to the embroidered fabric covering her foot. The feet slipped out of his sight and another slap of the belt landed on his bottom.

"Remove these." Delores lifted the fabric from his rear, a cool breeze running over his warm, red skin.

He didn't rise, rocking back on his haunches and releasing the buttons of his fly.

"Cover that with your hand. There is a lady present." The belt tapped on the front of his thigh, brushing his throbbing and dripping erection. Taking himself in both hands, he closed his eyes. His head was pulled back by his dark curls and Harrold opened his eyes to Delores' blue ones. The leather tapped his cheek, the smell making him mad. His hand slid over his length, soft skin over hardness.

Crack. "You would stroke yourself in my presence?"

Crack. "Who do you think you are?"

Crack. “Who do you think is in command here?”
Crack. Harrold's hand didn't stop and after the fourth lashing, he screamed out, the throbbing erupting from him.
“You are a dirty man, Harry. I think you will enjoy Blue Moon House.”
Harrold braced himself on his hands and knees, shaking. “That was—”
“Only the beginning.” His belt landed on the floor beside him. The embroidered slippers turned, so he seized an ankle to stop her.
“Thank you.” He barely recognized his own rasping voice.
“Would you like Miranda? To help clean you up?”
“No. I can't stay.” He stood, pulling up his pants.
“You are always welcome here, Mister Long. However, I think you need more than we can offer.”
Harrold rolled his shoulders, trying to shake off the discomfort of heading home. “Oh, I think you might offer more, Delores.”
Her lips, lined with fine wrinkles, curled up. “I might, but Lynn will offer so much more.”
He pulled on his shirt, stepping between Delores and the door. “You were in Blue Moon House. They did this to you?”
Her blue eyes narrowed slightly. Then she bared her teeth in a predatory smile. “I can tell you nothing. No one may tell the secrets of Blue Moon House.” Delores swept her skirts past him and out the door. “Thursday,” she reminded him.

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“Harrold, the Baskins are having a dinner Thursday. You will escort me.
Harrold paused in sipping his tea. “Thursday. I'm afraid Corbin has me booked late that evening.”
“You shall come after,” Veronica told him.
“Yes, dear.” He might have argued, but she would win in the end. She always did.
He never seriously considered divorcing her; he couldn't turn out a woman, even one as cold as Veronica. Even as she wore him down, he couldn't help but see the girl he married when he looked at her for

longer than a moment, a girl he had wanted to shelter and protect.
“You will also inform Virgil that the rose in the back is getting out of control.”
Harrold set the china on its saucer. He'd never understood Veronica's need for him to speak with the slaves.
“Your mother requires a new settee as well.”
Harrold rubbed his hand over his forehead. “What is wrong with the one she has?”
“Have you seen it? It's striped. I won't have it in the house.” Veronica waved a hand dismissively.
As though speaking of her had spurred her to action, his mother, Anne, appeared with a black slave behind her. Her wicker chair had metal wheels on it and creaked as it moved.
“Harrold, Veronica.”
“How are you this morning, Mother?” Veronica asked.
“I ache,” she complained. “The mattress may be at an end. Also, if I'm to spend so much time in one room, it must be larger.”
Harrold added another total to his mental ledger. It was a habit bred from his employment. He kept accounts for Corbin Cooper and several others. His funds could not accommodate everything the women demanded.
“There are no larger rooms, Mother.” He and Veronica had moved to the smaller one.
“Indeed,” Mother said, setting her teacup down. “Perhaps a larger house. One that could accommodate grandchildren.”
Harrold braced himself by the forearms on the edge of the table, hanging his head. If Veronica would let him fully enter her, they might have children already. However, even those first few times, she cried in pain and pushed him away. He hadn't tried in months. Turning his fork, he pressed it into the palm of his hand, the pain relieving other tension. The women wouldn't kill him, but they might come close.
Abandoning the rest of his breakfast, Harrold found his appetite gone. “I am needed at the office.” He would seek more businessmen for more books. If the women continued to make demands as they had the

last year, he would need a way to pay for it. Also, more time in the office was preferable to that spent in their company. If this had been a one-time request, he wouldn't let it bother him. However, the demands were constantly increasing and they seemed to talk of little else.

Dark-skinned Virgil was in the carriage house, seeing to one of his many chores: the horses.

“The missus would like you to trim the rose hedge.”

“Of course, sir. I'll see to it next, sir. Anything else, sir?”

“Knock me unconscious with that brush,” he said in a quiet mutter. The slave didn't blink, but a smile came to the corner of his mouth.

“No, Virgil, thank you,” Harrold finished in a louder voice.

“Thank you, sir.”

Harrold walked the eight blocks to Corbin's office house. He and several barristers worked in the many rooms of the house. One small room held the numerous ledgers and folders of receipts and records. Harrold had just opened the book belonging to one of the shipping lines employing the lawyers when Corbin knocked on his door.

“You're in early,” he said.

“Wanted a head start.” Harrold peered at the book rather than his employer.

“I need you on Thursday,” he said. Despite what he'd told Veronica, Corbin hadn't said anything about Thursday before now.

Harrold sighed. “Veronica expects me at the Baskins'”

“Ah, perfect. That's where I wanted to see you. I need help landing a new client, the widow Pearson.”

“Well, I shall be there.” Corbin had often used Harrold to charm wives and daughters of potential clients. He rarely did more than kiss hands and exude natural charm, but one or two of those had given him what his wife would not. A widow, a likely prospect for business—no wonder that Corbin wanted him there.

After a lunch with several other businessmen, Harrold had charge of a new ledger, which he worked on late into the evening. Detouring on his way home, he gave Delores the bad news.

“Both Veronica and my employer have need of me Thursday. I will

come later, but I'm sorry to say I'll be at the Baskins' party for hours."
"I'm sorry to hear that. She is quite selective. I will tell her, though. Thank you for letting me know. Are you coming in?" She stepped aside.
"I have had nothing to eat and am famished."
Delores pursed her lips. "I might feed you, if you earned it."
Remembering his last exchange with the older woman, he twitched in his pants. "What services would you require?"
"Oh, hot and dirty work." Her eyes shone with a smile she prevented from reaching her lips.
"I'm afraid I have no work clothes."
"Well, then you shall simply have to shed what you wear." She turned her back, paced down the hall, and snapped her fingers.
Harrold dashed to her side. Veronica wouldn't miss him.
Delores led him to a door he had never been through. He had sampled all of Delores' girls, even tested that Miranda was ready for the life she'd entered. In all that time, he had seen every boudoir, each with slightly different decor. Delores' room was like none of them.
"Go on," she urged. "You won't want to ruin your clothing. I'll fetch your food, for incentive." She did smile and somehow made it seem menacing.
Harrold hurried to remove his clothes once she closed the door. His cock was already hard and aching from her implications, her haughty stare, and her commanding tone. Why had he never paid her more attention?
The room was warm and cheery, very feminine with lace and frills throughout. The girls' rooms tended to be more wood and gilding, but here, every surface was dressed, with the exception of a bare patch of floor where all the carpets ended, and a stretch of wall behind it. The austerity was noteworthy against all the other furnishings.
Delores returned, the smell of hot beef and gravy wafting to Harrold and making him salivate. He didn't notice he'd taken position on the bare floor until she said, "Perfect." Sliding the plate onto a bedside table, she added, "Now kneel."
He hesitated. For some reason his knees locked, offended at the idea

of bowing to a whore. She picked up his belt from where he'd dropped it and lashed him on the chest with it. His member bobbed as it hardened further. He collapsed to his knees.

“Better,” she said, dropping the belt. He started when she closed a manacle on one of his wrists. “This is where I break the girls who will not bend.” A second cold metal cuff followed the first. Harrold craned his neck and saw the chains attached to the stone behind him. “I have hot and dirty work for you.” She raised her skirts and stepped forward, pushing his head back as her crotch smothered him. “Start working. The more you do, the more food I will give you.”

Harrold sunk into the furred lips that covered his mouth, puffing air through his nose. He nipped and kissed for a moment before using his tongue. He'd rarely done this with the girls, most often sampling them while they used their mouths on him. He wasn't practised and Delores was not musky and wet as the girls had been. That was quickly changing.

His cock continued to throb and longed for a hand, a mouth or, best of all, a woman to wrap around it. Instead, he was working to pleasure the woman he paid for sex. The irony was not lost on him, but neither was the joy of doing it, particularly when she took his hair in her fist, jamming him further between her legs until his tongue was coated in her.

“Yes,” she cried at last, rocking her hips into his chin. She stepped back and stumbled, falling to the carpet before him. He could really see now what he had been licking and sucking just a moment ago: her dark short curls were spread by the rich, pink skin glistening between. He groaned, fighting the chains to touch her, to touch himself. The smell and taste of her still filled his nostrils and mouth.

After a quick chuckle, Delores slid her ass forward, bringing it in reach of his now dripping cock. “Time to finish the job,” she said, grabbing his shoulders for balance while wrapping her legs around his waist.

He pulled on the chains, wanting to hold her, to fuck her. Instead, he was at her whim, subject to her thrusts, her time. She would rise on her feet and bob on the barest tip of him, taunting, and then thrust down, encasing him.

Eventually she couldn't play any longer as her slick heat had the inevitable result. She sank down and ground her hips into his, seeming to climax with him.

“Harry, Lynn is going to adore you.”

He dropped his head while Delores released the manacles.

“I'm sorry,” she said, lifting his chin with a finger. “I'm sure we'll arrange something. Go on and eat.”

His frown disappeared as he sprinted to the plate, tearing into the beef with his teeth. Delores ran a hand over his cheek.

“My poor, caged man. Lynn will free you,” she murmured, almost too quietly for Harrold to hear. More than ever, he wished he could be here Thursday.

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CHAPTER TWO – LYNN

“Missus Pearson, I was so sorry to hear about your husband. He was a pillar of the community.”

The widow stood, as did most of the guests. There weren't enough chairs and settees for half the attendees. Harrold bowed over the black lace glove and kissed the hand within. Before rising, he looked up through his long, dark lashes at the older woman, holding her gaze.

She wasn't old, much younger than his mother. Like Delores, her age seemed to distinguish her. As he rose, she stepped closer, hand sliding up his arm. “Your condolences are appreciated. We have been lonely in John's absence.” She stood near enough that Harrold could look directly down her pale cleavage, held in place by her black gown and corset.

Harrold's fingers found her waist, holding her lightly, preventing her from stepping back. “Being lonely can be difficult.”

“Indeed. Where is your beautiful wife this evening?”

Harrold smiled at the ploy. “Just there.” He indicated a cluster of women with a nod. “Mingling with the ladies of substance.”

“I find they have little substance, myself.” The widow's hand dropped slowly, brushing the front of Harrold's trousers and his thigh. He inhaled sharply. “I understand that you keep accounts. John left quite a mess for bookkeeping. I could use someone to help me sort it out.” Her hand moved again, making each caress seem happenstance, but her eyes left no doubt to Harrold that she intended each and every one.

“Harrold, Missus Pearson. You look lovely tonight. How you manage that is a wonder.” Harrold dropped his hand as Corbin approached. The widow took the opportunity to open space between them. “I see you found Harrold. Is he all I promised?” Corbin's grin was predatory.

The widow's smile was much wryer. “He is. We have requested he

help keep our books."

"Fabulous. I hope you consider our offer to manage those accounts and see to the will. A lady such as yourself shouldn't worry about business."

Harrold noticed a slight souring of the widow's expressions. "Yes, well, we need to consider that." Putting tone with expression, Harrold believed the widow had every intention of running the business herself. A clever woman if she could.

"Harrold," Veronica called, waving for him to follow her.

"If you'll pardon me, the wife calls."

"Yes, an obedient husband is rewarded," the widow teased with a gleam in her eye.

"Harrold, this is Percival Jackson and his wife Priscilla." He clasped Percival's hand and nodded to the elegant woman next to him. Her gown probably cost twice what Veronica's did, something she was sure to complain about later. Veronica introduced him to two more pairs, all emigrated from England with substantial inherited wealth. She might not meet his expectations sexually, but Veronica was exceptional at getting her foot in the most exclusive doors. It had proved financially beneficial in the past.

After standing by her side through several inane conversations, Harrold's attention began to waver. Gazing over the assembly, he paused to admire several bodices and more than one cinched waist. Having a wife gave him respect and position, but Veronica took no offense at his wandering eye. If anything, she encouraged it, eager for him to find another bed.

The woman who drew his attention most wore a fitted dress with short sleeves, her arms bare down to her fingertips. That was probably why she was surrounded by men, each taking his turn holding her hand and kissing those fingers. She looked his way, and he found himself unable to break the gaze. Minutes later, he glanced her way again and admired her throat as she tipped it back, laughing —no necklace. Obviously she wasn't the wife of any of the guests: they wore gloves and necklaces as well as ornaments in their hair. She was still smiling when she met his eyes again, holding his gaze like it

belonged to her. She blinked and turned, speaking to the gentlemen surrounding her before leaving them and striding in his direction.

“Follow,” she said when she came near, walking right past him.

He didn't excuse himself to his wife or her friends. None of them seemed to take any notice. Veronica didn't break in conversation, covering his withdrawal. The bewitching woman looked over her shoulder and seemed unsurprised to see him there. Her eyes drew his attention, glittering shards of topaz or amber. They seemed to glow unnaturally in the lamplight. She led him down a corridor and opened a door next to a pair of chatting women. Both watched them, but neither said a thing.

“You are a difficult man to get a hold of, Harrold. I don't think I like that,” she said as she strode to a trimmed lamp and opened it, casting the room in a gentle glow.

“Pardon, madam, but I'm sure I'd remember if I made your acquaintance.”

Full red lips pulled up on one corner in a smirk. “You had better believe you would.” Her lusty tone told him much. “We haven't met,” she said, circling him. “I'd been informed that you were in need of my services.”

Harrold's brow furrowed. What woman provided a service he needed? What service...?

A light shone behind his eyes just as she said, “Delores was quite insistent. More than is proper. I had to set her down for that.” Lynn, for that must be who this woman was, regarded her painted nails. “She enjoyed that, I think. Would you?” She glanced at Harrold from the corner of those oddly sparkling eyes.

“Would I what?” He was completely flustered. How had a whore gotten into this party?

Her palm slapped across his face. It was a sensation he was familiar with. Many ladies had spurned his advances when he was younger. However, this woman had a stronger arm than any of them. This pain rivaled that of the time his cousin had punched him in the jaw for dandling his lady.

“You will pay heed when I speak. Would you enjoy being reprimanded

by me?”

The suggestion alone made him burn. She was the ideal woman, strong, in complete command, not only of him, but every man at the party. Her force of presence bested that of most of the men he had met. He would love to obey her commands, especially if, as he suspected, they were anything like Delores'.

Her arm moved fast, spinning around to come up between his legs. He gasped in surprise and then winced as she squeezed him in her hand. The pain made his eyes water.

“You will not hesitate to answer, either.”

“Y-yes, madam,” he said through clenched teeth.

“Better.” She eased her grip, fondling him, massaging one nut and then the other before running a finger up his length.

“Despite putting me at such inconvenience, I believe Delores is right.” She pulled her hand back with a sigh. “Before we go any further, however, I need you to agree to the following terms.” She pulled up the drawstring at her belt to access her small purse. Unfolding a square of paper, she revealed a simple contract.

The below signed agrees to keep the confidentiality of Blue Moon House and share with no one the activities therein.

“Isn't it obvious to everyone what happens in a whorehouse?”

Her heel came down on his instep and he dropped the contract, hopping on the uninjured foot. “We are not mere whores and do not expect regular payment. Sign, or we are finished here.” She took a step toward the door.

“Wait!”

Returning, she slipped two fingers between the buttons of his fly, holding his erection and stroking it through his pants with her thumb. “Do you trust me, Mister Long?”

His breath hitched and he leaned closer, his forehead touching hers. “Yes.”

She smiled and tilted her head to kiss him, her lips not quite connecting. “You won't be disappointed,” she promised, releasing him to bend down and retrieve the contract. She made her way to a writing desk. “Sign and date, please.”

“What is it you need to keep secret?”

“Come to 36 Baker tomorrow night and find out,” she whispered, breathing in his ear.

He wanted to go there now, wanted to take her on this desk. He grabbed her and spun, lifting her hips onto the desk edge and pinning them there with his own.

“You are not in charge,” she reminded him. “I'll permit this to reward your obedience. Now fuck me, Harrold, and don't come until I have.”

Her pronouncement spurred him. She was in control and he would do everything she asked. Unbuttoning his trousers, he used the other hand to push up her skirt and rub along her sex. She was only slightly damp, but he had produced several drops already. He used them, used his cock in his hand to rub them into her.

“Pace yourself, Harrold. I'm barely warm.”

It was true. She was cool to the touch. Using his cock faster, he rubbed more, hoping that by denying himself, he could meet her requirement. Soon her breath came as quickly as his. Her dark curls swung as she tossed her head. He thought there had been enough foreplay and slipped into her with one long and rather slow thrust. She wrapped around him, hot slickness making her that much more enticing. He slid out and in as slowly, listening for her breath to hitch, watching for cues of her climax.

Unable to keep his pace slow, he started to slam into her. He fucked her harder when she showed no discomfort but instead tipped her hips into his.

The fire along his length built and the light of the room seemed to dim, as though even that were part of their fucking. He was close, his balls tightening.

Fingers wrapped the base of him in a vise. He'd never felt this before. The surge to his tip couldn't ebb back. Rather than throb with release, he remained painfully stiff.

“I'm not finished yet,” she told him, holding him tight. “You might use your fingers for a while.”

He'd been sure she'd been close, but now she was cool, calculating. That changed when he rubbed her. Blessedly, as he pleasured her, she

released him. He didn't erupt, as he had first expected. In fact, he didn't seem quite as hard.

Unwilling to take the risk of failing again, he used only his fingers until she was grunting and he could feel her squeezing his fingers. Then he slid his cock in place, continuing to use his thumb while he pumped his seed into her.

He braced on the desk and she took his head to her breast, stroking it.

“That's a good boy,” she said, as though he were her dog. “My good boy.”

He straightened slowly and Lynn slid to the floor. She shook her skirt, straightened her hair, and folded the contract to tuck back in her purse.

“If tomorrow is inadequate, we can arrange—”

Her words cut off as he seized and kissed her. When was the last time he kissed a woman on the mouth? He avoided it in the brothels, wanting to keep some distance. Most of the ladies who were enticed by him, like the widow Pearson, were taken quickly, almost shamefully. It must have been Veronica, but he couldn't place how long ago that had been. Before the brothels, before most of the ladies...

Her lips felt and tasted exquisite, like fine brandy, intoxicating, smooth and full. He held her gently, trying to cage her in his arms rather than grasp her.

At first, obviously taken by surprise, her mouth was open to him, allowing him full access to her breath and the odd tang on it. She moved her lips against his, forming and breaking their seal while her tongue touched his lips.

An odd burning seemed to fill him, and although he should be sated for much longer than this, he had the urge to take her again.

She wriggled out of his arms. “Hold there, Harrold. More to come, right?”

Once free of her mind-numbing kiss, Harrold started to feel like himself again.

“Tomorrow will be fine. Not soon enough.” Taking Lynn's hand, he bowed over it and kissed her knuckles. Truly, she was a lady.

“Excellent. I look forward to it.”
She left the room and he leaned on the writing desk again, trying to stop his mind from spinning. Eventually, he refastened his trousers and left the room. The same pair of women chatted in the hall and tittered as he passed. He frowned, unsure what they knew.
He was unprepared for his second slap of the evening, this from his wife. After landing the blow, she took his arm and pulled him toward the entry. She started her tirade there in a series of whispers.
“I can't believe you just left. If I didn't know your mother, I'd think she'd raised you in a barn. Honestly, I can accept the widow. That's business.” Apparently Veronica had taken notice of Lynn at some point. He could have sworn she was engaged when Lynn withdrew. Once they were in the carriage her voice rose to full volume. “But a whore, Harrold? In the Baskins' house. Do you have any idea how you embarrassed me? I couldn't care less how often you frequent them or what vile things you do with them, but as a guest?”
Veronica's shrill voice had never appealed to him, but her tone, the way she berated him. God help him, it made him want her. For the first time in a long time.
He sank to the floor of the carriage, taking her hands and holding them to his forehead. “Forgive me. Tell me what I must do?”
“Do?” she asked, confused and snatching her hands back. “Whatever do you mean? Get up. Sit like a man.”
He rose, but longed to continue where her command had taken him. He sat beside her, his hand holding her breast and thumb circling above her corset. “Tell me what you want,” he murmured in her ear, nibbling the lobe.
She nudged him with her shoulder to push him away. “I'll ask you not to treat me as one of your ladies of the night.”
Harrold exited the carriage first, offering Veronica his hand. He kept hold when she was on the ground, breathing into her ear again. “What of our room? Can I appease you there?”
“Are you mad? I've had you tear me open quite enough, thank you.” Snatching her hand back, she hurried into the house.
Harrold seriously considered walking to Baker Street before finally

following and lying silently beside his lovely wife.
There had to be a way out.

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Harrold raised the brass knocker and let it fall. The door was opened by a shirtless man with blond hair hanging in his strange, blue eyes. Like Lynn's, they seemed to sparkle, faceted, jewel-like.
“Harrold Long, I presume? Follow me.”
Harrold entered the house, eyes on the man ahead of him. He stopped at the sound of a scream. A smile spread across his face.
“When you are expected, enter and come here. You need only knock if you are not expected.” The man didn't open the door or even face Harrold again, walking farther down the hall.
Opening the door, Harrold entered. The room was dark, only a little lamplight dispersing the gloom. Aside from the bed with thick mahogany posts, there was a wardrobe. No carpet, no mirror.
His hands were on the handles of the wardrobe when the door opened. Lynn stood, framed by the light in the hall. Her figure was not hidden today either, wrapped only in a dressing robe.
“You don't need anything from there.”
He dropped his hands and turned to face her. “You look lovely. I think that might be even more flattering than your dress.”
“And even more flattering in neither.”
One moment she was in the doorway and the next she was at his side, her hand connecting with his buttock. It was as hard as her slap, though this stung much more.
“Never lie to me.”
“I wasn't lying—”
Slap.
He bit off his words. “You look—”
Slap.
“What would you like me to say?”
“Be honest. Tell me what you feel.” Slap. She connected again, making his bottom warm, stinging.

“Burning. I feel like I'm on fire.”
Lynn untied the robe, removing it. “Much better.” Harrold looked her over from head to toe. Her black curls rested on white shoulders. Glowing brown eyes shone in a heart-shaped face. Her lips were as red as he remembered, as plump and moist. Her throat seemed longer, if that was possible, framed in curtains of black.
Her breasts held his attention, dark nipples beginning to point. Each would fit easily in one of his hands, smaller than many of the women he'd known. Her waist tapered, forming a soft belly and pretty outward pointing navel. A sudden desire to suck on it came and was replaced with the urge to bury his face in the dark curly hair on her sex, tucking between her round thighs. He even took notice of her tiny toes, the nails painted to match her fingers. Had he seen painted toenails before?
Slap. His gaze returned to hers. “Good. That was quite enough staring. Remove your clothes.” As he did, she outlined instructions. “I will not stop when you cry out. I will not stop when you scream. When the pain makes you see red, cry your own name, not mine. Only then will I stop.”
Harrold pulled off his shirt, surprised, but at the same time glad to hear it. “I understand.”
“Are you looking forward to it?” she asked, moving to the wardrobe.
Harrold unfastened his trousers, sighing in relief when his erection was freed. “Hungry,” he answered, turning toward her. She held a riding crop, a replica of the one Virgil used when driving their carriage.
“On your hands and knees.”
“Yes, madam.” He knelt at her feet, exhaling on her skin before putting his hands out in front of him.
Lynn's toes, clear in front of him, moved. The crop landed on his bare ass. Harrold gritted his teeth against the pain. Lynn's hand ran behind his dangling balls, massaging them. She let go a moment before the crop landed on his other cheek. If he weren't on his knees, they would have folded. He clenched his jaw against the urge to cry out. Lynn's fingers traced the crease between his inflamed cheeks, resulting in an

unfamiliar tingling.

Crack. Harrold screamed at the unexpected pain erupting over his ass. His cock throbbed and Lynn took hold of it, stroking him slowly. Harry's entire body shook, his elbows threatening to drop him on his face. Lynn stopped stroking, holding him until he stilled. When he did, she used the crop once more.

Harry fell flat to the floor, screaming at the pain. Lynn gripped his hair and pulled his head back. “Do you see red?” she asked.

Breaking out in a sweat, he pushed himself up. “No, madam.” He gasped for breath, his bottom aching and burning at the same time. Every muscle of his body was held taut in anticipation of pain.

The leather of the crop tapped his cheek, the smell making him wild. His hips rocked, seeking release.

“Good boy,” Lynn murmured, her breath dancing over his back and leaving cool tingling behind. The next pain was smaller and unexpected. It felt like she had bitten him.

His cock throbbed and his entire body came alive. He felt the fire in his ass more keenly and it made his need for fulfillment that much greater. The crop landed again.

Harrold cried out, hitting the floor at the same time as his cock burst, spraying his release over the floor for him to land in. A poor reflection of the extreme pain in his ass was the low, cold pain of landing on his member.

“Harrold,” he called, rolling to his side.

Lynn sat behind him, letting him rest against her while she stroked his head.

“Good boy. Such a good boy.” She repeated the soft words over and over until his sobs subsided. “Can you move to the bed?” she asked, rising.

He pushed himself up and found he could crawl under the covers.

“Do you need anything?” she asked, her eyes filled with concern.

“Only a woman to lie with. One I can hold for a while.”

“Such a small request.” She slipped in beside him, taking his head onto her breast and petting him again. “Sleep, my good boy. This is only the beginning.”

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CHAPTER THREE – KENDRA

Harrold knocked on the door. Lynn had told him to return in three days, but he couldn't wait. A large black man answered the door a few minutes later.

“What do you want?”

Harrold frowned. “Do your owners let you speak like that?”

The man seized him by the throat. “I am free now. I take orders from no one.”

Harrold pulled at the man's fingers, starting to struggle for breath.

The man who had met him at the door on his first visit appeared behind the giant slave, the freed man.

“That one is Lynn's, Will. Let him go, please. We don't need to deal with bodies.”

Harrold felt the blood leave his face at the cold words. This man could easily strangle him.

“Well, I wouldn't want Lynn's ire.” Will opened his hand and Harrold held his knees as he violently coughed air back into his lungs. There was blood splattered on Will's pants, making Harrold that much more grateful for release. Whose blood did he wear? “You will wait in the parlor until Lynn collects you.” He stretched out his right arm, pointing and revealing more blood on the cuff.

Harrold practically ran to get away from the homicidal black man. Both men disappeared down the hall. Harrold paced the parlor, admiring portraits, including one of Lynn with the blond man in the hall. Another woman with equally dark hair but glittering blue eyes, and a man slightly darker than the one he'd seen. There was also a portrait of the slave, freed man. He looked menacing even there. Eventually, Harrold tired and sat in one of the chairs, wondering how late he was willing to wait.

“Harrold?” The musky smell of sex followed Lynn's entry.

He rose from the chair, taking her hand and bowing over it. “Madam.” She smiled and waited for him to straighten. “I have use of you.” She turned, robe swirling out around her knees and making Harrold long to remove it.

She didn't go far down the hall before stopping and holding the door for him. It was, in fact, the same room they'd met in previously.

On the bed lay a dark skinned woman, another slave, he supposed. He'd never given Polly more than a glance, but this woman had curves to shame his maid's slight frame. His gaze seemed fastened to her nipples that somehow managed to be darker than her already black skin.

The girl scrambled off the bed and to the floor. Only when she moved did Harrold notice how young she was, not even twenty.

“Easy, Kendra. He's not going to hurt you. Harrold, please remove your clothing and take that seat.”

Harrold didn't argue but stood close to the women as he disrobed.

“He isn't your boss or your master in any way. He is at most your equal here.”

He spun at that comment, holding his pants in one hand. Lynn's palm connected with the flesh of his ass, making him yelp.

“Did I suggest waiting?” Her eyes left no question as to who was in command of the situation. “There, you see, Kendra?” Harrold slouched in the chair, wondering what would happen next. “He answers to me, just like you do. Now, I want you to make him come.”

Harrold's eyes widened at the same time as the slave's large, brown ones.

“Please, Ma'am. I would—” Her scream punctuated her sentence as Lynn broke out the riding crop she had used on him. The girl flinched and cowered. “Yes, Mistress. Of course, Ma'am.” She hustled herself toward Harrold, kneeling in front of him. Her tongue peeked out to lick her lips and he was started at how pink it was. He leaned forward and cupped her chin.

“May I kiss you?” His hand jerked as the crop landed on his shoulder.

“That is quite enough hesitation from both of you.”

Kendra jumped, though Harrold didn't see Lynn wield the crop again.

She took his cheeks and pulled him down to her, kissing him awkwardly. He took charge of the kiss, using his tongue to guide hers. She relaxed, her shoulders falling in his peripheral vision. Perhaps she needed more guidance to obey Lynn. He reached for her hand, pulling it into his lap.

He was surprised how quickly the color of her skin faded from his notice. She was simply another lovely young woman set to please him, just like the many he had paid.

Harrold broke the kiss and sat back to let Kendra see what she was doing. “And you,” Lynn whispered in his ear, “will be whipped when you come.” He groaned at the new information.

Kendra was doing quite well, for all that she seemed mystified by him. She was learning through trial. Every time he twitched in her hand, he got a flash of her white teeth against her dark lips. She wouldn't have heard Lynn, wouldn't understand why he twitched when she wasn't stroking.

“Use your mouth, Kendra, just like you would on me,” Lynn suggested. She was more gentle now, the riding crop dangling at her side.

The girl turned to look at Lynn over her shoulder, but the older woman pushed her between Harrold's knees, holding her neck as she forced the girl to look closely at his cock. She seemed to shake, but took him in her hand again and kissed the tip. His head had just started to push through the foreskin thanks to her ministrations. Her hot lips stuck to him a moment, coming away with a bead of fluid stretching between them.

Kendra licked her lips again and smiled, letting out a relieved, “Ha!” Her lips wrapped around him and he tossed his head back at the sudden change. No longer slow and tentative, she took him into her mouth. She'd seemed inexperienced, but no virgin could do this.

As sometimes happened, he thought of Veronica, imagining her doing something sexual. As it usually did, the image made him laugh. He'd come to the conclusion that his wife had no sex drive whatsoever.

When he chuckled, Kendra let him slip from her mouth to laugh with him. That made him even jollier. The more they amused one another,

the braver Kendra became. “You're nothing like boss man,” she said as she straddled him, her long legs sliding under the arms of the chair. “I like you.”

“I like you, too,” he said, holding her back and leaning down to kiss one of those fascinating black nipples. Kendra squirmed when he did, her slick skin sliding over him until she caught him in the right place and pushed down with her hips.

Harrold's teeth closed on her nipple, biting her in response to the sudden change around him. She squealed but quieted just as quickly, rocking on him.

“I'm going to ride you until you come,” she told him, shifting her weight to drive more of him into her. He gritted his teeth as her cheek rested against his. “This isn't scary. It's fun.”

“There will be something even more fun after,” Lynn promised. “Not all men are here to hurt you.”

Harrold leaned into Lynn's hand on his cheek, then turned to kiss Kendra's dark round one. He wished there were a way to please both of them.

Kendra got her long legs in place and stretched toes to floorboards. Then she started slamming her hips into his. She wasn't heavy, but obviously strong, the chair groaning as loudly as either of them.

Lynn whispered to him again, “You will be strapped.”

The threat was enough nudge as Kendra squeezed him tight in her own release. He clung to the black girl, biting into her shoulder as he spurted stream after stream into her.

She sighed as she leaned back. Harrold held her and kissed her arched neck. She laughed and the sound warmed him. There was no laughter in his life.

“Nothing like boss man,” she repeated, taking Harrold's face between her paler palms and kissing him again. Her tongue moved more smoothly this time, finding his.

The kiss was interrupted by Lynn's command, “Kendra, on your feet.”

Startled, the girl nearly sprang from Harrold, standing by the bed with her head bowed and hands clasped before her.

“Harrold, kneel before her.”

He did so, staring in fascination at his white discharge against her dark skin.

“No, love, face away.” Lynn took his shoulders and positioned him. His flaccid cock began to stir. He had climaxed, which meant he was about to be strapped.

“No, Ma'am,” Kendra said behind him, “I couldn't.”

“You will, or I will use it on you,” Lynn warned.

A hand combed through his dark curls, making his eyes close heavily. “Forgive me,” Kendra whispered a moment before leather snapped across his back.

This was what he had come for. The sexual release was wonderful, but he could have that at any whorehouse. This, the blazing pain, seared away the intangible hurts. The aloof nature of his wife, the barrage from his employer and clients, they whittled away his soul. All were burned in the fire blooming in that welt.

“Again,” Lynn ordered when Kendra hesitated. The maid's arm was strong, built from labor, and the second welt burned as hot as the first. In this fire he became light, floating. The weight of carrying every whim of his wife, every request of his mother, every new client, all burned to ash. Still, he felt an ache in his heart and mind, a need for something his life denied him.

Four more lashes and each brought him closer to freedom, closer to relief. With one last crack, he screamed out, the fire having nothing left to consume. The leather fell to floor just as he did, his forehead resting on cool wooden planks. He could see the instrument of his torture, smell it, and it only aroused him more.

Kendra descended, wrapping her arms around his head. “I'm sorry. Forgive me, sir. I'm so—” she was cut off in a gasp at the same time a smack sounded.

“You are to address him as an equal,” Lynn reminded her. “Though, if you seek forgiveness, you might help ease this.” She used her toes to push Harrold onto his side and reveal his erection.

“Oh, yes.” Kendra didn't question, taking him in her hand and stroking vigorously.

Harrold rolled onto his back, gritting his teeth and grinning at the

renewed pain. “Ride me again,” he told her, pulling on her hips.
Kendra looked to Lynn, who nodded. Once the girl had hold of him again, Lynn moved to stand over Harrold's face. He looked straight up into the hair covering her and licked his lips.
“Can we both ride at once? I think so.” She knelt, her sex smothering Harrold for a moment. Then she shifted her hips, rubbing her lips on his. Needing no more encouragement, Harrold dug his fingers into Lynn's ass and used his tongue to lap at her.
The women each had her own rhythm but soon fell into synchronization. When they had, he felt a hand on his belly brushing him. Kendra squealed.
“Yes, yes, Mistress. That is good.” Kendra quivered around him and he thought he felt the fluid from her leak onto his thighs. He didn't stop using his tongue on Lynn. She didn't seem nearly as distracted or inflamed as Kendra, who rocked back and forth. Was she well?
“Take ease, Kendra.” As soon as the black girl moved, Lynn shifted to take her place. Once poised on Harrold, she turned so he could see the delight in her sparkling amber eyes.
“Tell me, Harrold,” she asked as she slowly raised her hips. Only the head of him remained sheathed. “Have you ever seen a black pussy?”
The image made him smile. How different would Kendra's dark brown lips between black curls look? Would they be red, like her tongue?
“No, Lynn. Do you think Kendra would oblige?”
The girl's dark eyes went wide and Lynn laughed as she moved quickly but shallowly, leaving the majority of Harrold's length exposed.
“Come, girl. No sense in modesty now. Show him.” When Kendra continued to hesitate, Lynn clapped her hands. The girl scurried to Harrold's head. Lynn stroked the girl's calf as she slid over more of Harrold. He closed his eyes, expecting to climax, but it didn't come. He opened his eyes to see his hands on Lynn's hips, though he couldn't say when he'd grabbed them. She held still, waiting as he did for the urge to pass. Then she chided Kendra again.
“Well, kneel, fool girl, or get on your hands and knees. He can't see you up there.”
Practically shaking, she dropped to her knees, turning to face away

from him. The first thing noticeable was how her thighs, and some of the hair, gleamed with moisture. As he leaned forward, he could see her lips, brown, but at the same time rosy. The outside, beneath the hair was dark. Inside, she was paler, reminding him of her palms. He could almost smell her. If only she were a little closer.

Lynn began riding him in the strangest mixture of quick and slow strokes. His hand stretched to touch Kendra, but he had to pause to adjust to Lynn's movements. Her lack of rhythm made it nearly impossible to steady his hand.

“Slow,” she said quietly, drawing one fingertip up his belly and stirring the dark hairs there.

Breathing unsteadily, he tried to obey, his finger drawing a jerky line on Kendra. It seemed to be slow enough, however, as the girl didn't move. Rather than play where he couldn't see, he circled her still open hole, barely entering her. Carefully, he dipped in until Kendra moaned and leaned back toward him.

“That's it, dove,” Lynn encouraged. The girl hesitated, but Lynn didn't, sinking down as deeply as possible. She squeezed him, making him pop inside her. Kendra started to move away when she realized Harrold was in his moment. However, as soon as the last pump of his seed was released into Lynn, she took hold of Kendra and pushed her down on Harrold's face.

The sudden thrust resulted in his tongue missing the sweet pot he'd been fingering and instead finding a fouler one. Kendra seemed to keep herself clean enough, or else Lynn had bathed her. In either case, he didn't hesitate long in licking the puckered skin.

Kendra's legs shifted, and Harrold imagined this was as unexpected for her as for him. The more he circled with his tongue, the more he thought of pushing in. He felt Lynn's fingers against his cheek, where they could further tease the girl. He finally tried his idea and was rewarded with a loud squeaking from Kendra.

She squirmed on his face as he and Lynn played with the girl until she begged them to let her rest. Harrold respectfully ceased immediately. Lynn, however, continued to play with her, working two fingers and her thumb. Harrold slid out from beneath Kendra, who seemed about

to fall over, eyes fluttering.

Watching her sway, and being ever a gentleman, Harrold sat behind the slave, letting her torso rest on him. Lynn smiled at this, using another finger to open Kendra.

“Please. Too...too much.” She leaned heavily on Harrold and then arched, thrusting her hips out. Lynn pushed in as far as she was able, holding the girl until her hips sank again. No sooner had her bottom touched the floor than Lynn fucked with her fingers again, slowly at first.

Harrold felt pity for Kendra. “Hasn't she earned a rest?”

Lynn laughed. “She knows how to make me stop. Don't you, pretty girl?” Her fingers moved faster and a scream tore from Kendra.

Rather than her name, which Harry had expected, Kendra said. “Milk.” She huffed, “Milk fat.”

Lynn removed her hand and patted Kendra's cheek. “Feel better, my dove?”

She was still panting, but nodded.

“Harrold, please lay her on the bed.” As he scooped the girl up, Lynn entered the adjoining closet and returned with a wet cloth. She carefully cleaned between Kendra's legs, then flipping the cloth, set it over her eyes. Lynn gestured to Harrold's clothes and he dressed while she found her robe again. She waited at the door, opening it when he was finished.

She closed it again when they were in the hall. “Poor thing. She's scared spitless by white men. If she'd had any idea who you are, she'd likely have run from here.” Lynn shook her head at Kendra's plight.

“Charity?” Harrold asked.

“Of a sort,” Lynn said, nodding. “In her case, obedience is a reflex. I'm hoping by using that, I can open her eyes. Maybe break the habit.”

“That wouldn't be wise, would it? You wouldn't want her punished by her new owner.”

“No, no,” Lynn agreed, leading Harrold into the kitchen. It was empty at this hour. “But I want her to consider and be unafraid. She won't be a slave forever.”

Harrold nodded. There was a movement toward paying black servants

rather than owning slaves. Of course, those servants were rarely treated better than the slaves. Lynn seemed to know that.

“Mostly, I want to shed her fear of her body. She was mistreated, as I expect you've guessed.”

“By her 'boss man.'”

“Another negro, if you can imagine, told her her body was the fruit of hell and he would fuck the devil out of her.” Lynn squeezed an apple in her hand until the skin split and juice ran down her fingers. “If I ever lay hands on him.”

Harrold touched her elbow, taking the piece of fruit. It wasn't old or withered, rather one of the new crop. How strong was she?

She looked at the mangled apple, then at him, and changed the subject. “You did well in there. You enjoyed it?”

He stuttered. “Yes, uh, yes.” He felt his face flush in embarrassment though he wasn't sure what embarrassed him. Dallying with a black girl? Certainly not being with two women at once.

“Good, because if you continue to come when you aren't scheduled, you will meet more of my clients.”

That word again, clients. “Do you expect payment?” He patted pockets, searching for his bill fold.

She waved him off. “No. We are sufficient for now. I might accept your offer later.”

“But...This is a whorehouse. How do you pay for things?”

“We are much more than we appear,” she said, maintaining an air of mystery.

Harrold's fingers played with the mangled apple. “I have no doubt about that.”

“There is something I would try. You must let me know when to stop. And you must trust me, with your life.”

He regarded her, still wearing only a dressing robe. She looked very much like whore. Could he trust a whore? Hadn't several stolen from him if dared sleep in their chambers? However, this was Lynn, with her strange-faceted eyes.

“Very well, I trust you.”

She sighed quietly. “I was hoping you'd say that.” She dropped her

hand to his hip, slipping open the buttons of his fly while she kissed him.

He almost laughed. He had stamina, but three times in an hour would be a record for him. The kiss was very sensual, teasing, giving him access to her mouth one moment and denying it the next. Now her tongue darted to touch his, now her teeth were closed. Beautiful teeth they were, with only one missing, a tiny window in her smile.

As her hands played, tickling him more than stroking, his mind began to swim. She trailed kisses down his cheek to his neck and he moaned very softly, her tongue licking him.

A sharp piercing was replaced with a low burn, as though he stood just a bit too close to the fire. Only this burn wasn't in his skin, it was under it. His flaccidity abruptly ended, the fire moving through him from where Lynn had nipped and through his cock, his ass, his toes.

She swallowed and he started to pull away. Her hand on his neck prevented him from moving.

“Please, stop.”

She licked his neck again and sighed happily. “You arrived before I took my share from Kendra.”

The fire in his blood went out and he felt cold. What monster sat beside him? How could so vile a creature, a vampire, appear so...ordinary? “You drink blood.”

She nodded and taking the apple from him, bit into it. “I can eat these too, but I'd never be full. These are here for you,” she explained, putting the fruit back into his hand.

“Do you...kill?”

She laughed. “I could, certainly. Instead I bleed my clients, not unlike physicians did.” She rose and began walking around, tending the banked coals, putting water on the stove. “Tea?” she asked.

“I should go,” he answered, jumping up.

“Remember your contract,” she said, resting her chin in her hand. She seemed disappointed but unsurprised by his reaction. He had discovered the real reason they swore everyone to secrecy.

All the same, he hurried back down the hall, past familiar sounds of pleasure and the occasional scream of pain. It had been alluring

before, those screams. Now he worried some fool was being killed.
The blood on the man at the door, his murderous rage.
Harrold swore he would never return to this house of horrors.

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“Harrold?” Corbin leaned into the room that was Harrold's office. “Do you have time for an appointment this afternoon?”
He set down his pen and turned in his chair. “What kind of appointment?”
“The widow Pearson. The will is nearly finished and she hasn't decided to give us control of those accounts. I'd hoped you might convince her.”
“This afternoon.”
“Well, I only hoped you'd meet with her this afternoon. You could convince her on subsequent visits.”
“Very well. I'll go now. Perhaps she'll feed me.”
Corbin clapped his back. “An excellent idea. She'll be expecting you.”
Harrold walked quickly, arriving at the Pearson residence a little after noon. A serving man answered the door.
“Harrold Long to see Mrs. Pearson,” he told the butler.
“Follow me,” he said, turning to lead Harrold through the house.
“Mister Long,” the widow said as he approached. “I have just sat down to luncheon. Will you join me?”
“It would be a pleasure, Mrs. Pearson.” He took the seat on her right and a maid trotted in with a plate in her gloved black hands. She made a second trip for silverware before dishing him out. “When Mr. Cooper suggested a meeting, I'd hoped you might be willing to feed me.”
The widow chuckled. “Goodness knows a man is of no use when his stomach is empty.”
He smiled but didn't answer further. When they had finished eating and discussing the arrangements that had been made for her husband and the estate, she asked him to follow her to the parlor.
“I think I might have some spirits. I never drink them myself, but John

did." She looked over the tables until she found the glass decanter and snifter. "Here we go. Brandy?"
"Oh, yes, thank you, Missus Pearson. You're sure you won't have any?"
"There's some cordial here for me." She filled herself a glass with much darker liquid. Harry couldn't help but compare the smell, taste, and even color of his brandy to Lynn. Her eyes had the same glow, same shine. Banishing thoughts of the vampire, he took a long swallow.
The widow didn't sit, standing with her skirts brushing his knees. "I know why Mr. Cooper sent you. I have no desire to hand over management of my accounts. However, I do have need of someone to maintain the books, as you already know.
Harrold nodded, taking a second swallow. John Pearson had left his books in shambles and the shipping business was ever changing, needing constant upkeep. "You are sure you wouldn't rather have Cooper dealing with sailors? A lady like you shouldn't—"
"Nonsense. I deal with captains, not sailors. Much more refined. Though, the smell might knock you over." She smiled, and Harrold laughed at her joke. "No, Mister Long, I don't want Cooper. I want you." She leaned forward, setting her cordial on the table at his elbow and putting her free hand on his knee. As she had at the party, she put her white bosom on display for him. It was ample and didn't show age any more than the rest of her. "Do I have you, Mister Long?"
"You make a pleasing offer," he assured her. "Are you sure it is what you want?"
Shifting her skirts, she managed to put her knees on the chair outside his. She leaned closer, arms wrapping his neck. "Quite sure. John has been gone for months. Can you imagine being alone so long?"
Harrold took hold of her bottom and shifted the pair of them so his now rigid cock pressed into her under her skirts. She gasped and closed her eyes. "No. It must be excruciating."
"Not here," she murmured, trembling slightly. "The slaves. Come to my room."
As soon as she closed the door behind them, she grabbed hold of Harry and pulled him down to kiss. She tasted slightly stale, probably

the cordial, but her lips were tender and moved silkily against his own. “There was something my husband was always loath to do. I wondered if perhaps...”

“As long as I can be inside you—”

Her groan interrupted him. “Definitely. And we won't have to mess with dresses and corsets,” she promised. She swayed as she made her way to the foot of the bed and bent over it.

“Ah,” he said in understanding. Flipping up her skirts, he rubbed her already wet lips with his fingers, teasing around each of her holes and clitoris. “You mean to have this done quickly.”

“Oh, Lord, Mister Long, if you keep at that, I will melt on the spot. It needn't be quick, but...I love this.” She arched her back and he took hold of her hair, keeping it bent.

“Shall I mount you like an animal? Hold on by this rein?” He leaned over her to whisper in her ear and nibble the lobe.

“Yes, yes. Just like an animal.”

He unbuttoned his fly and his trousers fell to the floor. He did exactly as he described, keeping hold on her hair and ravishing her ear. The sound of his thrusts squelched as he felt her tighten around him.

She screamed out, her eyes rolling as she climaxed. He didn't slow, however. His peak wasn't far away. Stroking right through her orgasm made the widow pant and claw at her covers, a second building.

“You are going to drown me,” he said, feeling the moisture on his legs. “You're going to make a pool on the carpet that will fill this room with the smell of us for the whole week. Is that what you want?”

“Yes, yes. God, yes.”

That was when Harrold felt the tightening that preceded his release. Rather than help the lady clean herself, he boosted her a little further onto the bed, her round bottom still exposed. He kissed each cheek once while buttoning his fly. “I would be happy to take the job. I hope you will call on me again.” She hummed happily and seemed ready to drift off as he left.

As he left, books in hand, he felt dirtier than he had going in. The encounter had been pleasurable, but looking at the books, he felt like a whore himself. He needed something to take the sting out,

something to burn it away. He headed home with plans to go to Peach House that night.

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CHAPTER FOUR – BLOOD PRINCE

“Mister Long,” Delores said in surprise. “I didn't expect to see you again.”

“Really? My wife certainly hasn't changed. She screams to heaven the moment I touch her.” It shamed him to speak of it, but among the whores he wanted to be less, lower.

Delores' blue eyes narrowed. “Follow me.” She led him past all the girls, many trying to get his attention, to her room. Once inside, she closed and bolted the door. “Did you sign the contract?”

Harrold sighed and took a seat at the Madam's makeup table. “I think I'm not allowed to tell you that.”

“Why are you back for my whores? Lynn—” She cut off, obviously agitated.

“You signed the contract,” he verified.

“Of course I did!” she snapped. “Why do you think I was so guarded talking to you?”

“Then...did she bite you?” He leaned forward, feeling foolish for asking.

“Of course she did. Many times.” Delores paused only a beat. “Is that what you are worried about? I have kept close tabs on Blue Moon House and its clients. They have people from every walk of life, every class.”

“I know,” Harrold interrupted.

“Well, even the lowest servant, a beggar, walks out of there every day, every night. No one dies in Blue Moon House.”

Harrold steepled his fingers, arms on elbows. “Did you meet a large black man?”

“William? Yes, once. He didn't speak to me, but the look he gave made me feel...less than human.”

“That's him,” he said in a whisper.

“But you aren't going to see William.”
“No.”
“Then why are you here instead of there?”
“Because.” He stood up, searching for a reason. “Because I didn't expect to pay in blood.”
Delores laughed.
Harrold became angry, grabbing her. How dare the whore laugh at him?
“Take off your shirt and tell me that.” Her voice was cold.
He released her and stepped back. She seemed larger as she took a pace toward him.
“You take off your shirt, Harry Long, and tell me you don't already pay in blood.”
She was right. The whores tried not to break his skin, but he pushed them to it regularly. It was the reason he was glad Veronica insisted he wear a nightshirt.
“Really, Mister Long,” Delores continued more softly, touching his shoulder. He plopped down in the chair again. “You need her. My girls, they'll do what you ask, and I'll take your money, but we can't give you what you need.”
“She can?” He was shocked when his voice broke.
Delores' gaze shifted nervously. “I can't promise that, but she is good, Mister Long. She has a much better chance than I do.”
Harrold put his face in his hands, rasped against the stubble on his jaw and remembered his mother's declaration that morning that they needed a second carriage. A second! As though he could afford the team they had without renting them out. Veronica had agreed, the two coming from both sides until he fled to work, on foot. Desperate for release, he had come here, to Peach House. However, if he were to return to Blue Moon House instead, he would save the few dollars he paid these ladies. Lynn hadn't asked for a penny.
“Will she take me back?” he asked.
Delores squeezed his shoulder and smiled. “I believe she will. I'm positive you aren't the first client to run. You'll have to tell me if you're the first that came back.”

“You weren't frightened?” he asked.
“Terrified,” she admitted. “I was all of thirteen when my mother sold me to my first Madam, and it was a broken girl the second madame handed to Lynn. I curled in a ball at the sight of a bare-chested man.”
The story reminded him of Kendra. “Well, she showed me that who I am has nothing to do with how others treat me. She also taught me how to turn those same men into balls of tears and putty. I have done my best to teach the same to all my girls. Some accept what I teach, some don't, but I try.”
“I don't fear men,” Harrold said in a whisper.
Delores knelt in front of him, putting her hand to his cheek. “No, Harrold. You fear women.”
He snapped up, away from her. “Afraid! I am a man. My wife is mine to do with as I please.”
She shook her head. “You fear letting them down, I think.” Delores' voice was lost as he stormed around the room.
“Keep your whores, woman. I shall have my wife.”
Delores' expression, if he had paused long enough to notice, was full of pity. “I'll let Lynn know you're returning.” She rose and closed the door again behind him.

***

Veronica lay in bed reading when he blustered in. “Good. You're awake.”
“Yes, I've had some thoughts about—” She was cut off by his ferocious kiss.
“Remove that gown, wife. I have need of you.”
Her flinty eyes narrowed. “Have you been in the drink, Harrold?”
He tore back the covers and pushed her dressing gown up to her thighs. “God, I've forgotten how beautiful your legs are.” He fell on them, kissing first her knees then working his way up.
She began beating on his head with her book, the wooden cover making a thump. “Stop it, Harrold! Stop that this minute!”
He lifted his head and put his nose to hers. “I will have my wife

tonight."

Her eyes began to water. "Fine, barbarian. Brutalize me and have done with it. Wipe your ass with my hair. Tear my breasts, bite them, crush them, you brute." She covered her face as though unable to watch what he did next.

Her tears unmanned him. He pulled down her skirt and returned the covers, moving to the wardrobe to change.

"Are you done?" she asked quietly. "Aren't you going to tear me open with that club of flesh you call a penis?"

Harrold sighed. "Veronica, as much as I appreciate your flattery, it is not as large as that. I was going to ask you to stroke it a while, but never mind." He'd offered to do the same and more for her. He would gladly suckle her breasts or pussy to please her, if only for a moment. However, it never was enough. He bit, or his chin prickled, or any other of a multitude of reasons she had. Curling on his side, away from her, he waited for her to trim the lamp so he might sleep.

Thursday he would try again at Blue Moon House.

***

With great trepidation, he lifted the knocker. Would the black man answer again? What would he do if he did?

Instead a woman very like Lynn appeared at the door. Like Lynn, she wore a dressing robe.

"How can I help you?" she asked, her blue eyes taking all Harrold's attention, as though they were gems. She cleared her throat and he blinked, regaining control of himself.

"I'm here to speak with Lynn. I was hoping she would take me back."

A smile changed the woman's stoic expression into one of joy. "You are Harrold Long. She will be so happy. Please." The woman stepped out of the doorway, bidding him to enter. "Have a seat in the parlor. I'll fetch her."

The woman only waited until he entered the sitting area before hurrying away. Harrold still felt nervous and paced rather than sat.

"You've come back?" Lynn asked from the doorway. "To stay?"

Harrold strode to her and took her hand, bowing over it. “Forgive my cowardice, m'lady. Your nature overwhelmed me.” He still wasn't sure he wanted her to drink his blood, but Delores was right. He was willing to shed it.

Her smile slipped a little. “I wish I could say you were the first, or the last.”

“Others have returned?”

She nodded. “A few. Would you come with me?” She led him to the same room. It must be hers, although most of the effects of a ladies chamber, makeup, changing screen, were missing. She took his hands and perched on the bed beside him. “Do you trust me, Harrold?” she asked, pulling his wrist to her nose. He could easily imagine her biting him.

“I-I think so.”

She shook her head. “Not enough. Did you think it odd how Kendra asked me to stop?”

He tried to remember. So much of the time with the black girl was seen through the blood haze of Lynn's bite afterward. He had thought it odd she didn't use her own name.

“Something about milk?”

She grinned, kissing and licking his wrist. Her touch was cool, but the way she brushed, teased, was making him quite warm. “That's right. The boss man first took her in a milking barn. That's her limit. When she goes there, she has gone as far as she can. She is seeing red. I would have the same from you. A sign of trust.” She ran the edge of her teeth over the inside of his palm before lowering his hand. There was no blood, no bite. “I will promise you, Harrold, as a sign of trust, that I will not bite you tonight or on your next two visits. Additionally, I promise to cease all encounters, touching, beating, whatever it may be, when you see red, reaching the place you cannot go past.” He wasn't sure he understood. He wouldn't say his name? “Kendra's milking barn,” she repeated. “Where do you fear to go? How much is too much?”

“Red,” he murmured. “Red accounts, red balances, red debt. Seeing red.”

She nodded. “You might also use black,” she said with a smile. “If there's anything you want more of, when you want me to push harder, you can say black.”

Harrold smiled, relaxing. Whether it was her promise or this new means of communication, he felt better. “Thank you. What can I do for you?” he asked, leaning closer.

“Hmm.” Her eyes took him in slowly. “I think you should remove your shirt.”

Harrold readily obeyed, peeling away his jacket and shirt.

“Sit here,” she directed, pointing to the floor between her knees. She leaned him forward and began tracing his back. “How did you come by these?”

“Belt buckles and careless whores.”

“Did you reprimand them?” she asked, working her way lower.

He chuckled. “Actually, I told them to beat me harder.”

“Why?”

The situation seemed odd to Harrold. He was between her knees. If he faced the other way his nose would be in her sex, but instead she asked him questions.

“I don't know. It felt...better when I bled. The madams were quick to punish the girls if they found out.”

“Did they?”

“When I couldn't avoid it.”

“Do you want more?” Opening the doors of the wardrobe, she dug around inside and came out with a whip. It was as long as she was tall, made of fine braided leather. The end was knotted with several straps flaring out. Harrold stiffened when he saw it, scrambling to his feet to stand nearer.

His chest rose and fell. His desire, he hoped, was clear on his face. Lynn turned slightly and cracked the whip. He almost erupted in his pants. Fighting with belt and fly, he rushed to get out of them.

Lynn stopped him with a hand on his wrist. As he had been before, he was impressed at her strength.

“Does your strength come with the blood?” he asked, curious, but afraid.

“Do you care? As long as I use it on this.” She cracked the whip again, harder and faster than the first time. “I want you uncomfortable, Harrold,” she said, stepping close enough to kiss. Her hand released his wrist so she could palm his erection through his trousers. “I want you to make a mess of your fine clothes. What do you say?”

Grinning, he found precisely the right word, “Black.”

Lynn tossed her head back to laugh. Continuing to hold him, she walked him to the bed, one of the foot posts. “Hold onto that,” she told him, stepping back. He wrapped both hands around the brass knob capping the short post.

There was no warning before the assault began. Each shoulder was lashed quickly. Lynn paused and Harry drew a breath against the fire kindled in his skin. The sting had just dulled and he was about to say black when another lash came, a heartbeat later, a second. Then she paused again. She was perfect. Closer together and he would scream and beg her to stop. A longer pause and he would lose the high he rode upon. He lost count of the lashes, but she warned him when she stopped.

“I need a break, Harrold. I...I promised not to bite, but your blood...”

He could feel it in a few places, slow drips rolling down his skin.

“Drink it,” he insisted. He'd paid for his pleasure in blood, so why shouldn't she take her payment? Besides, she wouldn't be biting him, drinking from him, only lapping what he shed. He held more tightly to the post against his anxiety. He was still afraid.

Lynn didn't hesitate. Her hands wrapped around him, over his belly and chest, stroking. Her tongue left him shivering as it tickled.

It wasn't immediate, but after mere moments, Harrold felt himself getting hotter and needier. He was going to erupt soon. His entire back felt like one bundle of nerves, a bundle Lynn plucked like a string.

When he did blow in his pants, he couldn't help but wonder what had set him off.

Lynn's breathing was heavy too, as though she had just reached a climax. She slipped under his arm and began kissing him.

Kissing a woman, her plump red lips, was a pleasure he had nearly

forgotten, one he had indulged last with the widow. He released the post to hold Lynn, maneuvering her onto the bed. Uncharacteristically, he seemed on the verge of orgasm again. How was she doing it?

“Yes, Harrold. Take me. Use me.” He almost stopped, hearing those words the way Veronica would use them, with scorn.

Lynn noticed his hesitation and worked her toes into the back of his pants, crossing her ankles to pull him toward her. “I'm your whore now,” she said with a bright smile. “Put us in the black.”

That worked. Slipping fingers under her buttocks, he pulled her to the edge of the bed before burying himself in her.

She sat up, to his surprise, and pulled his neck back down with her, kissing him again. The fire returned, something stoked by the kiss, and he thrust his hips in time with his pulse, quick and steady.

Lynn let go of his mouth to fall back, her eyelids fluttering. “You feel so good, Harrold, working your cock in me. Do you feel how hot and wet I am?”

He did, loving the way her slickness covered him, let him thrust smoothly. As she started to squeeze him, he prepared for another eruption.

Neither of them were left unfulfilled as Lynn clawed Harrold. Gripped inside her, he buried himself as deep as possible, releasing pulse after pulse of his seed into her. He nearly collapsed and she held his head to her breast.

“Rest, my weary boy,” she ordered. “Leave your cares here until tomorrow.” It was an indulgence he was happy to take.

***

Over more visits, Harry met more of Lynn's clients. He was a bit surprised how many she had. Including Kendra, and he hadn't gotten the pleasure of her company again, there were three women and four men. “How do you have time for them all?” he asked as Lynn sat with him in the kitchen. Meryl, the woman of the evening, was bathing in a magnificent tub of thin porcelain that Harrold had carried to the room

himself. Harrold supped on cold beef while Lynn combed her fingers through his hair.

“All my clients? To be honest, you've been the most frequent I've had, here or in the old house.”

“Old house?”

Lynn smiled and shifted to sit in his lap. “Yes. Before we came to America, Sophia and I ran the house in London. When it burned, we sought to try our luck across the ocean.” She paused, her brow furrowing. “No, there was one customer who came as often as you do. He was insatiable, wanting three women at a time.”

“How—?”

“We were a whorehouse back then, mostly human girls. Only Sophia, Nicholas and I.”

“What became of them?” Harrold appreciated this side of Lynn, which only appeared after she had satiated a client. She treated him as an equal, a worthy companion.

“We found employment for all of them. Either in another house or with enough money for a fresh start.”

“That was generous.”

Lynn nipped his neck and tickled him with her tongue. He had spent the last weeks watching her drink from her other clients and seen their reactions. She had started sampling him again recently. The burst of pleasure that followed even a small bite had put most of his anxiety to rest.

“Well, we had just come into a large inheritance, so we were able to be generous. Now turn about. Tell me about Veronica.”

While he sighed and shifted her weight slightly, she bit into his bare shoulder.

“Damn, how am I supposed to think when you do that?”

She stopped lapping the wound long enough to say, “Don't think, just answer.”

“Um, Veronica. She...she spurns me. Won't even let me kiss her. Claims I'm going to rape her. We had sex a few times, in the beginning, but it was always painful for her.”

“How are you to have children?” she asked. “Surely even she wants

that."

Harrold laughed. "Then I'd have to hire a wet nurse, and a nanny, and who knows what else."

"You don't want children?" she asked, straightening.

"So they can be as miserable as me?" he replied.

"Oh, Harry," Lynn cooed. "My poor, gentle man. Always able to stand up for others, but never yourself."

She was right and he knew it, but that didn't change the hundred tiny barbs that stung him every day. He occasionally did take a stand, but it was like a sand castle, worn away more easily than built.

"It'll get better one day, Harry." He had hated that name once, something for the whores to call him. Lynn had made it something else, something intimate. "Should we see if Meryl is finished?" she asked, moving to stand.

"I should go home," Harrold argued.

"Oh, well, come get your shirt and jacket."

Meryl was stretched out on the bed when they entered the room. Lynn shed her robe and joined her while Harrold donned his discarded shirt.

Meryl's keen eyes were distracted from Lynn. "Oh, the man is leaving? A pity. He was so much fun."

"Leave him be," Lynn told her. "Some people have to work tomorrow."

"Wouldn't he sleep better between us?" Meryl wondered.

Harrold did as well. If he ever found himself free of Veronica and Mother, free to stay, how would he sleep? Lynn was watching him, her expression sympathetic.

"I might, but if I didn't wake and return, I wouldn't hear the end of it from my wife."

"Well, if you have a woman waiting, that is another matter."

How he wished he did.

It was late when he stumbled into the bedchamber. Veronica had trimmed the lamp, but the soft glow showed her delicate features, even more lovely in sleep. No frowns, no pinched lips, just the beautiful girl he had been happy to marry.

Kneeling by the bed, he kissed the tip of her nose and her forehead. Once undressed, he didn't bother with a nightshirt, curling up behind her and sliding one arm under her pillow. The other rested on her belly. Despite tiredness and the need to be in the office tomorrow, Harrold couldn't sleep. His hand felt the seam in Veronica's dressing gown, fiddled with the lace hem, brushed the skin underneath. He teased so carefully, so lightly, that she hadn't woken by the time he touched the hair on her sex.

Surprised, he paused, but aside from a snuffle and shifting slightly onto her back, Veronica gave no indication of noticing him.

He combed his fingers through her hair, astonished by the slight dampness he'd never felt there before. She seemed to respond to his touch viscerally but didn't wake.

Eventually, he was dragging his fingers up and down that moist slit, listening to her breathing become less even and inhaling her musk. Her breasts rose and fell in shaking heaps.

She woke with a groan. “What? How? Harrold?” The last was exasperated.

“Yes?” He didn't see any need for shame. She had been enjoying it. To prove his point, he slid his finger over her clitoris. Her eyes fluttered before focusing again.

“That might be…good, but don't...think of...” she was having trouble making her point.

“Just relax,” Harrold suggested, becoming very slightly rougher in his handling, faster. His fingers slid lower and dipped into her.

Veronica immediately tensed, sitting up slightly. “No.” Too late Harrold felt the obstruction he had a few times before, like her hymen was thick and rigid rather than thin and broken.

“Let me try—” he shifted down, but Veronica closed her legs like a vise, turning away again. He'd never found out if his mouth could do painlessly what his hands seemed to fumble.

“And put a shirt on. I don't want you jabbing me all night.”

Harrold didn't dress, but he did roll away from his wife. “I thought I might not come home tomorrow.”

Veronica sighed sleepily. “You planning to live in the whorehouse? I

don't care, provided you don't flaunt the fact."
That made him more sullen. He almost rose and returned to Lynn and Meryl, but he was already in a warm bed.

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CHAPTER FIVE – LIAR

“Red!” Harrold cried as the crop bit into his side the third time. Lynn had taken time removing his clothes, caressed him to the point where goosebumps covered his skin. Once she had him over-sensitized, she broke out the implements of pain. For a moment, he considered asking her to continue. The pain had merely been too sharp, not unbearable. Before he could, she took his hands and held them to her breast, drawing him to the bed.

As she did so often, she encouraged him to sleep wrapped in her arms. Pillowed on her breast, he didn't regret ending things early. Not only did he find himself being held and kissed, it was early enough for him to consider dozing a while. Harrold's eyes drifted shut as Lynn began humming a lullaby.

When Lynn secured him the next time, he got the same rush he always had, but he found himself looking past it, toward the afterplay. When he cried red that time, he instead found his release in her. She didn't fight, and even encouraged him, taking her pleasure in his blood at the same time. It gave him more pleasure again. Her saliva —he had finally placed what connected her kisses with her bite—had him in such heat, he nearly began fucking her again moments after his release.

“No, no,” she said, pulling herself free and sliding up the bed. Harrold's head was cushioned on her belly. “Don't strain yourself, Harry. Rest. Sleep for now.”

Again, he was fortunate enough to have time to indulge, to rest in her feminine softness.

His next visits were unannounced, and he had the pleasure of sharing her with another man. His cock slid down her throat while James entered her lower. Harrold bit back a scream as Lynn nipped his foreskin, then she sucked the blood while using her tongue on his

length. Her saliva had him fit to burst.
“Holy Father,” James cussed. “What ever you did, it's driving her.” His thrust became more erratic as Harrold felt his balls tighten.
Lynn drank down his blood and then the cream that followed after. Moving faster than either man could, she clapped a hand to a buttock on each, bending them over. With a heave, she pushed their hips together, raining blows on both of them equally.
“Naughty boys, coming in me without permission. What kind of whore do you take me for?”
Harrold clenched his teeth against the pain blooming in his ass. He didn't want to cry out before James, but he could tell he hadn't been enduring the same beatings he had once. The pain was mounting too quickly. It didn't help that Lynn wasn't pacing as she often did, letting him breathe the pain. Rather she swapped cheeks, not slowing.
“Red!” he bellowed and a moment later James called his, “Horse!”
Lynn laughed as she flopped on the bed in front of them, giving them delights for the eye after the pain of the flesh. Harrold fought a yawn as Lynn got James settled, and he dressed slowly. She followed him out.
“You are headed home?” She sounded disappointed.
He yawned again. “Yes. I seem to be short of sleep lately.” He grinned at the reason for his tardiness and truncated nights.
She smiled back. “I see. Could you come tomorrow afternoon? I have a business proposal for you.”
Harrold dropped his hand in surprise. “What?”
“A business proposal. It shouldn't surprise you that we have a ledger as well. I would introduce you to Terrance. Please don't let me keep you. Business is for business hours.”
“You can keep me as long as you want.”
She smiled, but the expression was somehow sad. “Not yet,” she said, turning and heading into the house.
The more time Harrold spent here with Lynn, having her fill the role his wife should, the less he wanted to return to his daily life.
He hurried through his morning, curious what the books for Blue Moon House would look like. What expenses did they have? What

income? He knew it wasn't the sort that other whorehouses collected.
He was delayed in answering Lynn's call by a message from another woman. A page arrived with a request from the widow Pearson that he visit and review her accounts. Corbin was nearby when the message came and clapped Harrold on the back. “Great work there. I wish we had control of those funds, but we see it through our other clients. She'll need help soon and you'll be there.”
Harrold pulled her book from his shelf, although he was fairly certain she wouldn't look at them. Appearances needed to be kept, however.
Again, he felt like a whore himself, after spending the morning thinking about whorehouses. The widow would not require sex of him —she wouldn't stop paying him—but there was little doubt in his mind that the occasional visits to her house were the reason he held her accounts and not someone else.
The slave opened the door and led Harrold to the parlor. The widow still wore black, though he wondered if that wasn’t because it brought out the milky glow still shining beneath her aging skin. The woman's body hadn't faded with age. Some women became overlarge or rail thin, but oddly, the widow seemed to keep a wiry strength and maintained a physique to entice a young man.
“Mister Long, a pleasure for you to visit. Jenny was just about to serve my luncheon, as I'm sure you were aware. You will join me?” She stood and offered her hand, which Harrold took, pressing her knuckles to his mouth.
“Thank you. I feel starved.”
“We'll fill that stomach. Get you ready to focus on other things.” Her eyes on his body left him little doubt as to where she wanted his focus. She noticed the book as he set it on the table and tapped it with a finger. “If it's not too complex, perhaps you can apprise me while we eat?”
Harrold sat back as Jenny filled the plate set for him. “You may go,” the widow said, waving her away. “Now, Mister Long, where are my accounts?”
He moved several dishes aside to make room for the book. “Your holdings have been divided over six prospective projects.”

The widow sipped her tea and nodded as he spoke. She stopped him at one point to encourage him to eat, but otherwise simply listened.

It was only after he'd gotten a little food in him, but before he'd finished his report, that he felt her shoe drawing a line up his leg. He paused to take a hold of the toe.

“Would you mind, Mister Long? These shoes seem to pinch.” She lifted her leg to put her foot fully in his lap and he turned his chair slightly so he might unlace the shoe. The other followed and the widow sighed, curling stocking-covered toes.

“Yes, that is much better. I should have done with slippers.”

Harrold traced one of her fine ankles and then drew his hand under her skirt and back down again.

“Are we finished?” he asked, sensing the change in her attention.

“You seem to have things well in hand, and Mister Cooper's suggestions have borne fruit. We will have to remain on this track in the future. Perhaps give him more control over our investments. Tell me, Mister Long, how is your wife?”

Surprised, Harrold dropped her foot and she sat up. “What are you playing at?” he asked, a little angry.

“I only wondered. She seemed so frail. Perhaps she isn't meeting your needs, or in poor health?”

Harrold nodded once, understanding the game. He rose and moved behind the widow, kissing her cheek then neck and whispering into her ear. “I'll ask you to leave my lady wife out of this.”

“Of course,” she said, breathless. “My apologies. Shall we retire?”

As she rose, Harrold took her by the waist, bending her back onto the table and kissing her. A lady's kiss was once something he sought. Now, however, the widow seemed sour in his mouth. Steeling himself, he followed her to the bedroom. She made no preamble, hoisting her skirts and bending onto the mattress.

Harrold took a moment to admire her backside. Like the rest of her skin, it seemed thin, the blue veins spider-webbing over her legs, but white, luminescent. It was smooth and her buttocks beautifully rounded. The hairs on her sex were peppered with gray, unlike the ebony hair in her coif. The gray didn't put him off. In fact, the sliver of

sunlight coming through the split in the drapes made them shine, and her skin glow. His hand, caressing one buttock and then the other, discovered she was wet between them. He spent several minutes teasing her, watching her rise on her toes and swing her hips, and listening to her moan.

Finally he was ready to release his fly. Still feeling like a whore himself, he took hold of the widow's hips and slammed his whole length into her.

“Yes. He never did it right. Not like you.”

Harrold's stomach turned and he thrust wildly, his sack slapping between her well spread legs. Fighting himself, wanting pain to cleanse the stain in his heart and not finding any, he struck her instead, a resounding smack on her ass. He was surprised how much the shake in her flesh, the bright pink palm print, improved his mood. The widow squealed and kicked her leg but didn't complain.

“Yes, fuck me, I'm so close.”

He slapped the other cheek and she started to spasm, pushing back into him. He wasn't about to ejaculate and instead continued to thrust, feeling her moisture slide down between them.

She was panting, cursing, a bitch in heat. He slapped her once more, finally coating her insides and pulling away.

Tossing down her skirts, she rolled onto her back, breasts heaving in the confines of her corset. He leaned down, his face close to hers.

“I trust you are satisfied with your accounts, Mrs. Pearson.”

She nodded, unable to speak.

He kissed her, pulling her lips between his. The widow's eyes closed and Harrold was bolstered by the bliss in her expression. He felt less used and eased back, touching her hair with one free hand. She surrendered even further, moaning into his mouth.

“Good day, Missus Pearson,” he murmured, turning to go.

The spring returned to his step as he made his way to the next lady's house. Raising the brass knocker, he rapped several times before removing his hat.

Lynn answered the door wearing a dress he didn't recognize. It seemed old-fashioned, but lovely.

“Thank you for coming, Harry.” A man emerged from the parlor free of a jacket, but wearing a shirt and trousers from a suit. It was the same pale man who had answered the door for him before and convinced William not to kill him. “This is Terrance,” Lynn said as the pale man offered his hand.

Terrance was about the same height as Harrold, which made his piercing light blue eyes that much more noticeable. Like Lynn's, they had an unnatural faceted sparkle, as though his eyes were actually diamonds. His hair was pale, nearly white, and his grip very strong. It seemed Terrance was another vampire.

“Come with me into the parlor?” he requested.

Harrold gave Lynn a longing look but followed the man. Business before pleasure.

Terrance placed an old and worn leather-bound book in Harrold's hands. “The accounts of Blue Moon House, from my demise until now. As you can see,” he said, urging Harrold to open it, “I have been less than meticulous with my records. Frankly, I'm an investor, not an accountant.”

“A good one,” Harry muttered, seeing the value doubling every five to ten years. He also noticed entries for blacksmiths and leather workers. They seemed likely tack and horseshoes, but there was no carriage house here.

Terrance smiled. He was prevented from responding as Lynn dropped off a tray with tea and only one cup. Harrold pretended not to notice, tried not to think of them or their thirsts. That sort of thinking would only distract him. Lynn put her hands on one arm of his chair and kissed Harrold's cheek before leaving again.

“Yes,” Terrance said. “Well, moving here meant I didn't need to spend any time hiding. I simply change my dress and become my own nephew, or son, or cousin.”

Harrold stopped turning pages. “You don't age?” he asked.

“Not a day.”

“And the sun?” Presumably he couldn't do all of this in the evening. Some meetings would be during the day.

“Is painful, but only fire is lethal. I frequent the evening parties to

learn of new projects and use the overcast days to invest in them."
Harrold nodded, closing his book. "So you would simply be another client for me?" He rubbed his chin. "I'm nearly at my limits."
"Shift someone else. You have seen that we can pay."
There was no argument there. In fact, it had become abundantly clear why they didn't need to charge their clients.
"Here." Terrance gave Harrold a similar leather notebook, but this one was new. "That is our current net worth, as near as I can approximate it and where it is invested. You are familiar with them?" Each project was followed by a share percentage.
"Yes," Harrold said, sipping his tea.
"So you can keep track of revenue from them?"
He nodded. Many of his clients used the same system, particularly the widow Pearson. "It will take little work for me to keep it current. May I ask?" He had begun a puzzle with the old and new books, and it wasn't simply leather and metal. "You have assets, in what form?"
"Jewels," Terrance added readily.
"Really?" he asked, looking up. He hadn't noticed Lynn wearing jewelry, even the night he had met her, and there it had been an oddity.
"Yes, my grandfather was a jeweler. My father and I didn't follow the craft, but learned appraisal. Most of what I still have are sized for children. They are of little worth in their current form, but the gems and even gold are valuable."
Harrold nodded, not understanding why anyone would craft jewels for children, but who knew what eccentricities the people of Terrance's grandfather's day indulged. That might be more than a century ago. "Well, maintaining these shouldn't be difficult. I know the players on these projects. I could let you know when others are starting up."
Terrance nodded, smiling. "That would be greatly appreciated. Attending pipes and brandy takes time from my endeavors here. I'm sure you know which I'd rather invest my time in."
Harrold took a moment to imagine spending all of his time here. He would be hard pressed to find anything outside that would take his attention. As he mused, he noticed a man walk past the door of the

parlor.
Terrance rose. “I had hoped you'd come earlier. That is my evening appointment. If you have any questions, Lynn can relay them, or I'm free most mornings.”
“When do you sleep?” Harrold wondered aloud, flipping through the older book again.
Terrance chuckled. “We don't, really. We spend the mornings resting, but that's easily set aside at need. Thank you, Harrold. You will, of course, be paid out of the same account. I have no idea what rate—”
Harrold stopped him. “This account will be my pleasure. My payment is found here,” he assured him. “Is Lynn still—?”
“Here!” She seemed to appear from nowhere. Their speed still startled him.
“Are you available? I have a few hours before I am expected.”
She smiled and took his free hand, leading him down the hall. “What do you think of Terrance?” she asked.
“He seems savvy.”
He saw her nose wrinkle in profile. “Not quite what I meant. Help me undress?” She turned to reveal a double row of buttons rather than laces.
“I didn't see many entries for help,” he said as he unbuttoned. “No slaves on the register.”
“No. One lady comes and cleans each morning, cooking as needed. As you've seen, we prefer to have food on hand rather than cook a meal.”
Most of what Harrold had eaten was cold cured meat and bread. He had seen entries for the baker and butcher. “We have one farmer who brings produce occasionally. We need little more.”
Harrold sighed in relief when he worked out the last button without breaking or pulling off any. He placed gentle kisses on Lynn's spine as the fabric fell away. As always, her skin was cool. He worked up rather than down, his hands rising up her sides to cup her breasts just as his lips found her earlobe. Her breasts weren't large, but her nipples were pert and slid between his fingers all the same.
“I would devour you,” he whispered.
In the blink of an eye, she had seized his jacket, spun him around, and

straddled his hips while pressing him down onto the bed. “That's what I say,” she said with a smirk. Her lips captured his in a searing kiss. She nipped his tongue, the quick stab of pain washed away in the arousal that followed her saliva in the wound. His hands worked the dress off her shoulders. She cut his tongue twice more in the time it took to remove her garment and open his fly. By then, his head was swimming and he ached to be buried in her. Rather than stop when he lifted her hips, Lynn shifted her mouth down and bit into his neck.

His hips thrust wildly as his release came, overwhelming him. His body relaxed as she licked the bite shut.

“I suppose I should go,” Harrold began. He was interrupted by her hand on his thigh, landing with a resounding crack. He bit his own tongue against the pain.

“I am neither your wife nor your lady to take excuses.” She connected again on his other thigh.

“Red,” he said calmly, holding her hand to stop her. “I can come back.”

She sighed, accepting his rejection. “I have Kendra tonight. Tomorrow?”

“I will be back.” He considered stopping in to see Kendra again. Lynn put an end to those plans.

“She is coming for the last time. I have convinced Delores to buy her, now that she doesn't fear men.”

Harrold was surprised. “A black whore?”

Lynn nodded. “Some men like the riskiness, and since they aren't all slaves any longer, they can pay for the privilege. Mostly, though, she will be cleaning. There aren't a lot of clients for a black girl.”

Harrold nodded. “She is still a slave?” Lynn frowned but nodded again, obviously wishing she could say differently. “Tomorrow,” he said again, kissing Lynn's cheek. “Veronica needs me at a party tonight anyway.”

Lynn nodded. “Tomorrow, Harry.”

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CHAPTER SIX – NICHOLAS

After an evening entertaining Veronica's friends, Harrold longed more than ever to visit Blue Moon House. In their room, he changed jackets, planning to do just that.

“Could you have rushed them out the door any more quickly?” Veronica asked while Polly unfastened necklaces and earrings, placing the jewels safely in their box. Even that reminded him of what he was missing.

“I'm sure I might. Was I impolite? They were making their farewells.”

“You are just in a hurry to return to the arms of your whores.”

“Can you blame me?” he asked, exasperated. “Yours are closed to me.”

She stood in only her corset, which Polly was unlacing.

“Leave us,” Harrold ordered, dismissing the maid and admiring his wife. It was one of the few pleasures she gave him. He would enjoy it.

Veronica clicked her tongue. “She hadn't unpinned my hair.”

Harrold shed the jacket he had just put on and strode to his wife. He pulled the pins from her dark curls and let them fall, one by one, to her bare, pale shoulders. As he did, he kissed her nose, her cheek. He avoided her mouth until the job was done, a pile of pins on the table. Then he combed his fingers through her hair, making her sigh. Reaching an arm around her, he took the laces to her corset, freeing her breasts.

“Go on,” she said, pushing on his shoulders.

“Have I hurt you?” he asked, pressing his lips to her collarbone.

“No. Why do you keep trying?” she asked.

“Because you are my wife. I'd rather enjoy our years together than endure them. Because the mere sight of you pleasures me, and I would pleasure you at least as much.”

She sighed very quietly. “You know, I believe that is the first time you

have said it so honestly." Her expression fell. "You have never been able. Even your most gentle kisses feel wrong."
"Why?" he asked, pulling her nightdress over her head and sitting beside her on the bed.
"I think I finally know. You must promise not to punish Polly."
He frowned, confused. "Why would I—?"
"Promise," she insisted.
"Very well, I promise."
"I noticed her touch when dressing me." A flush crept into her pale cheeks.
Harrold smiled and put his lips to Veronica's. They were trembling. "I'm not a woman," he said.
"Please don't hate me."
He laughed and hugged his wife. "Fear not, my wife. I wouldn't shun you for that. Though I do wish we had stumbled onto the solution sooner."
She flushed even deeper and snapped. "Why? So you could watch?"
He grinned. "Among other things. Does Polly indulge you?"
"Don't be disgusting. I couldn't lie with a slave. You met Missus Johnson tonight."
"They're still people, Veronica," he said, referring to slaves. "I've had sex with one. She was lovely." Veronica shuddered next to him. He tried to recall the woman this evening, wishing he'd paid more attention. "Really. They are only different by the color of their skin. You would have liked Kendra, I'm sure of it."
"You really aren't angry?" she asked in wonder.
He stood and began undressing; the need to leave was gone. "I've been finding my pleasure outside this marriage for years. Why shouldn't you?"
"I really didn't expect... Do the whores...?" She wasn't clear, but Harrold was fairly sure he knew what she wanted to know, what she couldn't say aloud. He climbed into the bed.
"Some women call on them. Ladies don't come to the houses, for obvious reasons. The whores sometimes go out, though. Also, I've known whores who prefer other women."

She sighed, resting her head on his shoulder, something she hadn't done since they were newlywed. “I thought I was completely unnatural. The first time it happened, I almost ran to your mother.”
He gripped her hand tightly. “You didn't tell her, did you?”
“No.”
He sighed. “I'm not sure she would understand. I'm fairly certain that the reason I have no brothers isn't lack of opportunity.” His mother had been so much easier to live with when his father was alive. He expected much of her discontent was loneliness and grief. Harrold still expected to find one morning she had gone to join him.
“I thought of that,” Veronica said sourly. “You really would...watch?”
“Actually, I would find a woman that could suit us both.”
She pushed up to look in his eyes. “That's possible?”
He chuckled and patted her hand on his chest. “My wife, there is little impossible with some imagination.”
“Well,” she said with a small yawn. “I'm not sure I'd be comfortable with that any time soon. I still draw the curtains when I touch myself.” She clapped a hand over her mouth as though she hadn't intended to say that.
Harrold chuckled and kissed her cheek. “Please, don't let my presence stop you.”
She slapped his arm, then giggled. “This feels very strange.”
“Don't worry tonight. I'll be gone tomorrow night if you want to invite your friend over again.”
“Hmm.” She curled onto her side, away from him. Harrold felt content in his marriage bed for the first time since he'd had one.

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Eager to talk to Lynn, he was uncomfortable with the crop she took up entering the room.
“Red,” he said, reaching out to take it from her.
She threw the crop to floor with a clatter. “You resort to that too quickly, I have noticed. You have used it more and more readily. If you want something new, you should talk to me, not hide behind that.

I am not your whore to dress down as you please. I find your demeanor unfitting for what we expect here. I'm afraid I cannot stay."
The door creaked and swung back off the latch from her slamming it.
He ran after her, to apologize. Remembering her mention of demeanor, he skidded on his knees. "Forgive me, please!"
She sighed and pulled the foot he grabbed for out of his reach. "I need time, Harry. I would not hurt you in anger. Return to your room."
He stood and returned, for the first time afraid he might not be welcomed back. Unable to see how he would make it through his empty days, he began pacing.
The room was smaller than he'd ever realized. Only three paces across. After several passes, he pulled open the wardrobe. He expected most of what he found, the rope coils, the whip, the crop. He didn't expect the metal utensils at the bottom: pincers, knives. He also tried to puzzle the purpose of a set of leather pieces, wide bands, but with buckles and holes.
"Harrold?"
He closed the door, hard, and winced when it made a crack. He turned to face the male voice. "Follow me," the blond man said, never fully entering the room.
Harrold stepped quickly to match his long stride. He was led to a room nearer the parlor, farther from the kitchen. The room within wasn't much different at all. The furniture had minor differences, but obviously came from the same era, probably the same maker. He'd expected it to be like the whorehouse with each room different, fitting the girl or the client's tastes. Here they were all stark.
"Lynn has asked me to give you an ultimatum. You are not required to endure pain and punishment, but for your safety, we require obedience and honest communication. You will spend the next month with me, obeying me as your Master, or you will leave us. You may return the accounts or maintain them, taking suitable pay. That arrangement is separate from this. We still need an accountant."
Harrold felt the room close in on him. "You?"
"I am Nicholas. Though, I think best you call me Master or Sir." He removed the shirt he wore and crossed his arms over his broad chest.

He watched Harrold with sparkling blue eyes. They were darker than Terrance's, more like sapphires than diamonds. His smile was warm, making Harrold less frightened of what he might expect.

“If it would make you more comfortable, we can start where Lynn left off.” He didn't make any move toward the wardrobe, still watching Harrold for a response. “But you aren't interested in that any more. You've gotten a taste for something else, something intimate.”

“I should have told her.”

“You should,” Nicholas said, stepping closer. “Now you'll have to show her.” He leaned in and Harrold fought the urge to back away. He didn't want to leave. He didn't want to kiss Nicholas either, but he wanted to leave less. So he held still as the man's lips approached his and met.

He had expected it to feel different, kissing a man. It did, the stubble on his lip made it much rougher than a woman's, but the main part of the kiss— his lips tense but not rigid, and moist but not wet—was everything he had come to love about kissing Lynn. It was also what he couldn't find at home or in a whorehouse. He couldn't help but return the kiss, seeking more of the same.

He was startled when Nicholas' hand slid into the front of his pants. It was only a brush, but after, Nicholas took Harrold's hand and put it on the bulge in his loose trousers. Harrold fumbled at first, but when Nicholas' hand returned to him, Harrold began stroking as well, mirroring the touch he was receiving.

“As slow as you need,” Nicholas murmured. “Have you ever been with a man?”

The kissing resumed and Harrold had to break it to answer. The saliva from Nicholas was making his head swim and his cock even stiffer. “Once. A man with Lynn.” His words were broken by his rough breathing. “Fucked him while he fucked her. Amazing.”

Nicholas moaned quietly. “If you come to me as often as her, we will have to do that again.”

Harrold groaned, his balls tightening. Nicholas pulled Harrold's pants down enough for the white ejaculate to spill on the other man's belly. Releasing his cock, Nicholas took Harrold's waist, pulling him close

and pressing the sticky cream between them.
“Fuck, Harry, you stroke well. I get the impression you've done it a lot. To yourself?”
Harrold nodded, his nose brushing Nicholas' before resuming their kiss.
“I want you to suck me.”
Harrold backed up slightly, unsure how to respond. He didn't want to give up.
Nicholas pressed down on his shoulders and Harrold knelt. The loose trousers were untied at the waist and Harrold faced a cock at least as large as his own, possibly longer. It was framed in blond hair, which also covered the pair of balls hanging behind. The sight didn't arouse Harrold; it made his stomach roll.
“Just like you've seen girls do it, Harrold. Slow and steady. Start by rubbing me again.”
That instruction was now easy to follow, and as he rubbed, Harrold found the cock nearer and nearer his mouth. Swallowing, he placed a kiss on the tip where the foreskin pushed back.
Nicholas brushed his hair and bent down to kiss Harry's head. “That's it,” he said.
Harrold kissed the cock again, this time remembering to continue stroking. Nicholas' nails scratched his scalp, and that did more to arouse him than anything else. Harrold opened his mouth and let the head of the cock slip past his lips. His stroking pulled it back out, but it slid in again when he released his tug.
Nicholas seemed to enjoy the sensations Harrold was managing to produce. He twisted Harry's dark curls in his fingers and held Harrold's head to push just a little farther into his mouth. With his partner's cock still a long way from the back of his throat, Harrold became more confident, twisting his hand and fondling Nicholas' balls while continuing to suck and stroke.
“That's it, Harry. You're doing so well.”
His first response to the name was still to stop what he was doing, but it was easy to hear the intimacy in it, the same as was in the kisses. Harrold wanted to make this man happy, just as he wished with Lynn.

“Ready, Harry? I can't hold back much—!”
As good as his warning, Nicholas sprayed a hot jet over Harry's tongue and into his throat. Part of his shaft had never entered Harry's mouth, so although the fluid made him choke at first, it didn't gag him. Instead, he was able to swallow and clear his mouth of everything. It seemed Nicholas' semen didn't have the same effect as his saliva. Harrold felt quite grounded. On the other hand, Harrold had tasted himself on a woman's lips enough times to know that Nicholas' ejaculate was different, sweeter and creamier, not at all unpleasant.
Nicholas stepped out of his pants and helped Harrold out of his. Then he ducked into and out of a closet, bringing a wet cloth to wash his belly. He passed the rag to Harrold, who did the same. By the time Harrold was finished, Nicholas had pulled back the covers and stretched out on the bed.
“I know I'm not as...plush as Lynn.”
Harrold chuckled as he slid in beside Nicholas, eager to find out if this would be as familiar as their kiss. Nicholas' hand was larger, but caressed him in the same ways. He felt vulnerable and safe at the same time. It was something about these vampires, the way they straddled life and death, that made his own life seem that much more precarious.
“Have you ever been touched here?” Nicholas asked, his fingers playing over Harrold's cheeks and drawing up between them.
Harrold tensed but didn't answer, focusing instead on relaxing. He had been touched there, but always by women. The first was a whore who swore her clients enjoyed it. He hadn't, not really. It hadn't hurt either but rather sent a jolt through him. It wasn't particularly appealing then or later when Lynn teased him there.
Nicholas stopped his fondling for a moment. When he resumed, the sensations were different, more intense. Rather than a jolt, this was a thrum. It started low and grew. It grew until it pinched.
Harry gasped at the slight pain and Nicholas stopped. “You have no idea how close I am, do you?” Nicholas murmured in his ear.
Harrold's eyes widened in surprise.
“Don't fear.” Nicholas nipped his ear, sucking the blood and making

Harrold's pulse race again. Harrold leaned back, but thankfully, Nicholas didn't press farther. Even so, he felt a slip and a stretch.

“Feel how wet that is?” Nicholas asked. “It's about to get wetter. Then it gets better.” He didn't move deeper, but the thrum intensified with the stretching. Growing, widening, throbbing inside Harry, it drove him mad. Harrold felt himself stiffen. It was too soon for him to really rise, but he could not deny arousal any longer.

Following a series of pulses, each making his breath catch and his back arch, Harrold felt Nicholas slip from him. The soft slide was everything the vampire had claimed, even better.

“Damn, Harry, I thought this was your first time.” His voice was rough, lusty.

“It was,” Harry whispered. He had thought it would feel different. He wasn't a lover of men, not like Veronica and women. She seemed honestly appalled to share her body with a man. Wasn't he the same? Wasn't he only interested in women?

Nicholas seemed to sense his discomfort. “Perhaps I shall leave.”

“No,” Harrold said, sliding out of the bed. “I'll go. When should I return?” he asked, pulling on his pants. He tried to avoid looking at the man, even peripherally.

“Harrold, look at me,” Nicholas ordered. He obeyed without thinking and felt himself flush. This was the man that had—

“You are still a man, Harry. This makes you more, not less.”

He nodded, feeling himself tremble. “Isn't this what women do, after their first time?” He found a shirt on the floor that looked to be his size and put on. “Get weepy?”

Nicholas smiled. “I suppose they do. You feel different now, is that it?”

Harrold nodded, still shaky. “More?” he asked in disbelief. He definitely felt like less of a man.

Nicholas rose and wrapped his arms around Harrold, kissing him gently on the lips. “You consider more now, don't you? You are willing to try more? To reach further? You are willing to let me stretch you? If you do, we can help you reach the stars.”

Harry tucked his head into Nicholas' neck, shame still coloring his

face. Only when he felt the flush fade did he step back.
“When would you like me to return.?”
“Tomorrow,” Nicholas answered with a brilliant grin. “I have a filly I've been breaking in, and I think you might be just the rider.”
Harry felt his own grin reflecting Nicholas' at the thought of a woman waiting and ready.
Veronica teased him when he got home. “At last, our hero returns. Break any hearts?” she asked.
The conversations they had now were infinitely stranger than those before. He buttoned his nightshirt while she trimmed the lamp. “What about you? Have an entertaining afternoon? Did you ask if I could watch?”
She laughed and nudged him away. “Obviously she didn't take enough care with you. You're entirely too excited, not satiated at all.”
He rolled onto his back. “Actually, it wasn't a she.” He wasn't sure Veronica could hear him, his voice was so low.
She sat up, staring at him. “You seemed so interested in women,” she said in disbelief.
“I am,” he assured her. “Tomorrow night, it will be a girl.”
“Tomorrow? I know you keep the accounts, but how do you afford —?”
She cut off at his laughter, her face pinching into a frown.
“I don't pay where I go now. In fact, I'm keeping their books.”
“Oh, well, then—”
“Besides,” he cut her off, “you and my mother spend more between you than I ever did on whores.”
The pinched expression wasn't helped by that statement, and she rolled away in a huff.
“Don't be angry, Veronica,” he said, stroking her arm. “When I didn't know how to please you, I couldn't deny you anything.”
“Why do I take that to mean you plan to deprive me in the future?”
Harrold chuckled and wrapped his arms around her waist. She didn't claw her way out of his hold as she once had. “I might ask you to compromise, but I would never deprive you.” He paused, curious. “Are you happy now? Is she enough?”

“Are your ladies enough? Don't we all want something permanent? Safe?”
“I think I've found that.”
Veronica yawned and patted his hand, still on her waist. “I feel safe at least. You have no idea how I feared every night, how I was sure you would be forceful. I talked with my friends and sisters after they married. Some men...they are cruel, Harrold.”
He nuzzled her ear. “Was I ever cruel?”
She turned and kissed him lightly. “Never.”

***

It was after a day in the office that the idea finally hit him. He trotted to Delores' whorehouse. He wasn't surprised that one of the girls answered the door. He was surprised it was Kendra. Her mouth worked on air, trying to speak. Eventually, she simply stepped aside.
Harrold made his way in, smiling at the familiar faces. When Delores found him, she was as startled as she had been on his previous visit.
“Mister Long, to what do we owe this pleasure?”
“Could I speak with you alone?”
Once in her chamber, he made his offer.
“And you think Kendra is best suited to this task?”
Harrold nodded. “If you are willing to sell her. My wife currently has a maid, but I think this sort of change will be perfect.” He tried to remember exactly what Veronica had said. She hadn't mentioned her desires to Polly, but surely that initial shock of being with a slave would subside. He'd told her about his encounter with Kendra, after all. “Do you think Kendra will accept?”
“Why would she have any choice? I'll send her,” Delores said with a sigh.
“Good. If she isn't to Veronica's liking, we can arrange for another girl to visit. If Kendra does work out, I'll see to selling Polly to another family and buying Kendra from you.”
“Very good, Mister Long. Shall I send her tonight?”
He had hoped to prepare Veronica. He also had a few more questions

for Delores. “How is she? As a slave?”
“She's obedient, if that's what you're asking. She does a good job on the chores and has not flinched at the few clients who have asked for her.”
Harrold nodded. “I'd like to speak with her, if I may.”
“Of course,” Delores said, rising and moving to the door. Shortly after she left, Kendra entered, bobbing a curtsey.
“Do you remember me?” Harrold asked when she didn't relax.
“Yes, sir,” she answered. “I have no more dealings with that place.”
Harrold waved her off. “That's a shame, but not what I wanted to know. Do you prefer women?”
“Prefer them to what?”
Harrold smiled at her naïveté, even when in a whorehouse. “For sexual activities.”
“I..I..Yes, sir.”
“Excellent, Kendra. So does my wife. She will not be expecting you tonight. Tell her that I have sent you to tend her this evening. Tell her that I would like her to dismiss Polly for the night. She will, and when you prepare her for bed, tell her the real reason I sent you there.”
“Would you be...joining us?” she asked, a flush adding pink to her dark cheeks.
“Not tonight. Perhaps, though. If Veronica agrees and you are interested.”
She nodded emphatically. “I am, sir. Until then, I will do what I can to please your wife.”
“Perfect!” He clapped his hands together and stood, squeezing the girls' shoulders. “She will be hesitant because you are a slave, but I'm sure you will be able to convince her. If things go well, you will be my lady's maid.”
She looked up, eyes wide. “I wouldn't be—?” She looked around, unable to say the word.
“You would cook, clean, and be Veronica's companion. If that is acceptable to you.”
“Oh, it is! I'll do everything to please her. Thank you, sir!” She kissed his hands. “Thank you!”

From there, Harrold made his way to Blue Moon House. As he'd expected, a naked woman was bound in Nicholas' room. She wore a leather harness that hung from a hook in the ceiling, similar to those used at the butcher's to hang carcasses. A black cloth was tied over her eyes and she twisted her head from side to side at the sound of the door.

Nicholas held a finger to his lips but beckoned Harry with his other hand. Harry walked slowly, trying to be silent, and upon reaching a corner, undressed quietly.

Nicholas slapped one of her legs. “I am still here.”

She seemed to relax. “Thank you, Master,” she murmured.

The harness allowed her to hang quite low, dangling level with their waists. Nicholas stood between her splayed knees and he indicated that Harry should stand at her head.

“Is your mouth ready for me, Donna?” Nicholas asked, winking at Harry, whose stiff cock was almost touching the woman's lips. “Tip your head back and take me.”

She obeyed and Harry pushed in, holding her chin as more and more of his length disappeared into her. He was amazed at how completely she was able to swallow him.

“Didn't I tell you it would be easy?”

She tried to mumble a reply, her tongue and throat tightening around Harry. In response, he took a stronger grip of her chin, sliding out slightly and then pushing in again. His balls almost touched her forehead. She moaned and it nearly pushed him over.

“Yes,” Nicholas praised. “Excellent, but I think you can take more.” He seized her hips and thrust hard enough that the woman's nose was shoved up into Harry's balls. He groaned and she gurgled, but Nicholas paid neither of them any mind as he thrust into the woman over and over again. Her gurgling became more urgent, more squealing, and her throat, working on his tip, brought Harry his climax.

Nicholas released the knot tying the cloth over her eyes. She was still hanging just below Harry's now flaccid penis. She blinked, adjusting to the light and then opened her mouth in surprise.

“Hello,” he said.
“Master? Are you still here?” she asked, concern in her eyes.
Nicholas ran fingers along her ribs, making her flinch and twist. “Right here, Donna. Did you like that?” He reached up and released the rope holding her legs. She slipped to a sitting position on the floor while he unbuckled the cuffs on her ankles.
“Y-yes. I think so.” She continued to watch Harry warily, leaning toward Nicholas.
“Don't be scared, Donna. He's here for the same reason you are. I will send him away if you don't relax. I have more in mind for tonight.”
“Like me?” she asked. “Then it will be fine.”
“Not just like you. He originally came for pain. Have we done that?”
“N-not much.”
“Well, this might be the time.” He released the rope tethering her arms and she held them, covering her breasts. “Stand up,” Nicholas ordered.
She did, but moved closer to Nicholas, turning away from Harry.
“Don't be shy,” he told her. She held out the cuff, but he didn't unbuckle them. Instead he used a ring in one to fasten them together. When the clip snapped, Donna looked up at him, slack jawed. “Trust me,” Nicholas told her turning her to face Harry.
“Harry, please sit or kneel there.” Harry sat, his legs out in front of him, lounging braced on one wrist. “Donna, stand here.” He pushed her to walking and stood her over Harry. “Harry is going to return the favor.”
Harry grinned. This wasn't something he did often before Lynn, but the ladies here were always very clean. Washing was often part of the enjoyment here. He also saw her hair had been clipped short. “Did you do that?” Harry asked her, passing one hand over the fur.
“N-no. Nicholas did.”
“An excellent job, Master,” Harry said, looking up into Donna's eyes as he passed his fingers over her hair and then between the lips. Her eyes closed and her lips parted.
There was a resounding crack when Nicholas landed a slap on one of her buttocks. She yelped and rose on her toes. Nicholas continued to

hold the cheek, squeezing and pulling. As soon as Harry was sure another blow wasn't to follow, he dipped his fingers into her, using them to pull her closer to his face. She moaned and rocked.

“I think she might fall, Master,” Harry warned just before he put his mouth to her short fur, nipping at the skin covering her clitoris. She squealed and rocked again.

“I think you are right.” Taking the rope still attached to the cuff, he passed it over the hook and knotted it above Donna's head. She wasn't stretched, but she wouldn't fall, either. She was on her feet for the moment, but when Nicholas slapped her other cheek, she slipped. Rather than stop, this time, Nicholas repeated the action twice more on that cheek and three times on the other. She was hopping by the time he was done. Then he knelt behind her, while Harry took the opportunity to press his tongue between her lower lips, curling up to flick her clit. Fingers joined the pair he had inside her and he felt Nicholas arm jostling his. The vampire seemed to have his mouth buried between her ass cheeks.

Donna squealed and gasped, pulling against the ropes anchoring her. She spread her legs, hooking them over Harry's shoulders and driving his whole face into her crotch. He obliged, using tongue, nose, and even chin to stimulate her. The crack he heard next was different than the ones before. Nicholas had found an implement: flogger, whip or crop. The snapping of leather made Harry stiffen again, wishing he could bury something else in the girl hanging from the ceiling. He didn't stop as her legs tightened around his head. He didn't stop when she screamed in pain. Instead he tried to drive her further, and by the wetness coating his tongue, he was succeeding.

Nicholas didn't leave the girl alone. Just as she would near a climax, he would sear her with pain. Harry knew how it would work and as the two came closer and closer together, she screamed out her joy at the moment the leather licked her skin.

“Yes, yes, ow, yes.” Harry worked his tongue, trying to catch all the juice she gave. Her legs slackened and were untangled from him.

“Harry, untie this.” Nicholas scooped Donna up and nodded his head to the knot in the rope on the hook. Harry pulled the right end and

the knot unraveled, letting Nicholas lay the beaten woman, stomach down, on the bed. Knowing what his Master would need, Harry entered the closet and found a bench with a bed pan and a low table with wash water basin and pitcher. He poured water on the rag and brought it out to Nicholas.

“Thank you, Harry. Here you are, Donna. These won't last an hour,” he promised, kissing each stripe before laying the cloth on it.

“Is there anything I can do?” Harry asked, standing beside Nicholas.

“Donna? Would you like Harry to hold you instead of me?”

She didn't speak but shook her head, reaching for Nicholas.

“That's fine. Just let me get him something to eat.”

Harry stopped Nicholas, hand on his shoulder. “I know the way.”

Nicholas squeezed his hand. “I'll find you in a while.” Then he swung his legs into the bed. “You were beautiful tonight. Did you see how easily you came?” Harry tried not to listen, feeling a bit like an intruder. Closing the door with one hand and carrying his pants in the other, he strode swiftly to the kitchen, putting on his pants there.

He had just started digging in the cold cupboard when the black man, William, came storming in. “I need a knife,” he said, pulling one from the block. “They never listen. Why don't they listen?” he muttered.

“You. What are you doing here?” he asked, gesturing with the knife.

Harrold was even more afraid of him now than when he had his throat in that hand. “Ni-Nicholas...with girl—”

“With his girl.” Will scoffed. “You can help me. Come with me. I need another pair of hands.”

“I don't think—”

“Perfect. I don't need you to think. I need you to obey. That's why you're here, right?” The knife caught moonlight through the windows, glinting. Why, when he was at knife point, did he stop to think that those were the only windows he'd seen in the house? What did that matter? Was he planning to escape through them?

“Come,” Will insisted, seizing his arm in a painful grip. Harry, more afraid of the knife than the hand around his arm, walked to keep up. It meant he was dragged less.

The scene inside the room was unlike any Harry had seen before. He'd

been tied, even chained, but he'd never been strung out. It was like the rack, if anyone still used anything so barbaric. The ropes went straight out from the man's arms and legs and wrapped around a pair of dowels that could be turned to tighten the ropes.

“Shit, Jim, you've gotten lax. You been strugglin' while I was gone?” Will turned the crank and the naked man cried out. “That's better. Now let's get you nice and hard again so I can sit on that twig you call a penis. You,” he said, pointing at Harry with the knife, “fill his mouth so I don't hear him scream.”

The set up, the level of suspension, was not so different from Donna. Watching Will draw shallow lines along the man's belly, licking up the blood, didn't arouse Harry, but he did recognize the glaze in Jim's eyes, the way he rose and fell with the pain. Harry remembered needing that burn to climax, and it came as no surprise that the man's cock was lifting off his belly the more Will tortured him.

Harry unfastened his trousers and tried to remember being like this man. Back then, he would have happily accepted everything Will did. He stroked himself until he was reasonably rigid and stepped over one of the ropes securing Jim's arms so he stood at the man's head. Harry could feel the dowel and rope just behind his knees. Without hesitation, he bent, forcing his length into Jim's mouth.

Almost immediately, the man began to cry out around Harry's cock. The muffled sound seemed to impress Will. “Not what I expected. Well done, man.” With that, he turned away and held onto the dowel past Jim's feet to brace himself as he moved his ass over Jim's cock. When it caught his hole, he pushed down. Jim bit down on Harry, and all three men pulled the ropes slack. Will was up first, checking Jim. Harry jumped back, almost as quickly, glad to only have a few bite marks, no blood.

Jim, however, was not jumping up.

“Jim? Wake up, Jim,” Will said, tapping his cheeks lightly. “Wake up!” he ordered, slapping the man's thigh, hard.

“Bobby,” he said, coming around.

Will laughed and then released and lifted the man easily onto the bed. “We were done a moment ago. Are you sure you can handle the

pain?"
"No worse than most times," Jim said, rubbing his forehead.
"Very well. I will be back to check on you. Rest."
Will grabbed Harry again, though less roughly, and pulled him out behind him. "Who are you?"
"Harrold Long. I was with Lynn."
"Right, right. With Nicholas now. Do you normally stick your cock in men's mouths?" he asked, raising a black eyebrow.
"No, but it seemed the best way to do what you asked."
Will laughed again, shaking his head. "The very best, and the last I expected from you." He shook his finger at Harrold as he walked down the hall toward the parlor, still laughing.
"Harry?" He turned to see Nicholas exiting another room. "Did you find something to eat?"
"Not yet. Will needed me."
"Will? Really? And?"
Harry smiled. "It went well."
"Aren't you making a splash? Sophia must be the only one of us you haven't impressed. She will be very disappointed to know she was last."
Harry had no idea what he was supposed to say to that.
"There is another room if you'd like to lie down." Nicholas started to lead Harrold down the hall.
"Actually, I'll just grab my clothes and head home. My wife got a surprise tonight and I don't want to miss it entirely."
"Of course," Nicholas said, clasping his shoulder. "I think this month is going to fly by faster than either of us expect."
Harry hoped so. He still wasn't keen on sex with men.
He also wasn't keen on finding his bed completely occupied. However, he undressed and rolled in beside Kendra, nudging her closer to Veronica. She woke and sat up, moving as if to leave. Her dark skin hid her perfectly from his sight. He heard her rustling with clothing, though. "Leave that," he said, "Take one of the robes and find Polly's bed. She'll have gone to visit her sister with the night off." He would have to think of a way for the three of them to sleep here in future. A

trundle bed perhaps?

“Thank you, sir,” she whispered and he jumped when her lips touched his cheek. “Thank you very much.”

“Thank you,” he murmured, curling around his wife and closing his eyes.

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CHAPTER SEVEN – KENDRA RETURNS

“I can't believe you sent me a slave.”
“Why not? Wasn't she lovely?”
“Quite, but it isn't proper.”
Harrold choked on his tea. “I'm afraid, love, that being with women isn't really proper at all.”
She frowned at him, a familiar expression that didn't touch him today. He was in too good a mood and so was she. “Have you ever been so satisfied?” he asked, grinning.
“No.” It was then that Polly rolled Harrold's mother into the dining room and they changed the topic.
“Who is the new slave, Harrold? Polly just told me she came in this morning to find a new girl in her bed.”
“I'm thinking of selling Polly to Mister Conners. That way she can be closer to her sister.” Polly, who wasn't in a position to comment on her future placement, lit up at the suggestion. “I can't speak for Mister Conners. He might not have need of another slave.”
“Sir?” Polly asked, bending her knees. “My sister was telling me that old Fanny passed a couple weeks ago. I think he does have need of a new girl.”
“Perfect. I'll speak with him today.”
“That doesn't answer my question, Harrold. Who is this new girl?”
“Her name is Kendra, Mother, and you will like her. She is a hard worker and very grateful to us for taking her from a worse owner.” While he was speaking, Kendra entered the dining room, carrying a tray with breakfast on it. “See, here she is, already working and I haven't even bought her yet.”
“Shouldn't she be in her own house, tending her owners?” Mother looked at the girl skeptically. “I'm not sure I trust her.”
Kendra bobbed a curtsy. “Is there anything I can do? Madam Peche

will be waking soon."
"Peche? I don't know any Peche."
"She's a whore, Mother," Harrold said plainly. His mother's scowl deepened at that revelation. "Now you can see why Kendra is so eager to join our household."
"Yes, but really, Harrold, can you trust a whore?"
"Kendra isn't a whore, Mother. She's a slave. Thank you, Kendra. You may return to Peach House. I'll be by later to speak with the Madam."
Kendra dipped her knees once more before scurrying out of the room.
"I don't like change, Harrold. Polly has been a wonderful maid. Why should we train another?"
Veronica saved him from answering. "She joined me last night, Mother, after you had retired. She's the one that filled your bladder with hot water for the night and helped me undress. She also cleaned away the supper dishes, and did a fine job of that. No chips or breaks. She tells me she was a maid in the whorehouse, and for another owner before that. She isn't untrained."
Mother's frown was alleviated, but she said nothing more. Polly wheeled her away when she had finished eating, and helped her dress. Harrold left for the office, leaving Veronica to deal with any other objections his mother might think up. If she wanted Kendra, she would have to help him on that front. In the meantime, rather than go straight to the office, he stopped at the Conners ' house.
"Hello, Missus Conners, is your husband home?"
She smiled and smoothed her apron. "No. He's gone to Dover on business. I don't expect him back for a few days."
"Days?" Harrold asked, feeling disappointed. "Well, I wonder if you might make a proposal on my behalf. Prepare him, so to speak."
"Yes?" she asked. He could sense her suspicion.
"You know my maid Polly has a sister in your household."
Missus Conners smiled again. "Yes, I understand she came to visit Sara last night."
"Yes, well, I was wondering if your household had need of another slave."
"Why?"

“I have found a girl that I think suits myself and Missus Long better than Polly. My mother, on the other hand, has become quite fond of Polly and is reluctant to let her go. Is there anyway your house could take on Polly?”

“Well, I can't buy her until my husband returns, but yes, we do have need of another girl. You are sure there isn't another reason you are ridding yourself of her? She isn't distempered, is she?”

Harrold shook his head, smiling. “No, I imagine she is as even-tempered as her sister.” Missus Conners frowned a bit at that as well. Harrold wondered if maybe Sara weren't as quiet as Polly.

“As long as she is a hard worker. I have a decent garden here that needs stronger hands than mine to work it.”

“She doesn't work often with Virgil in our garden, but I know she isn't unfamiliar with the chores.”

“Good. I'll tell my husband. Come back in one week. He'll be here then.”

“Thank you, Missus Conners.” He took her hand to kiss and noticed the flour on it. He blinked in surprise.

“Go on with you. What is it to you if I do my own baking?” She was very upset now.

“Nothing at all, ma'am. May I come back this evening to sample it?” He grinned like the young boy he used to be, the one that would be coming back in an hour to pull a pie from the window sill.

“No! Be gone with you!” and she shooed him just like the scamp he remembered. Actually, judging Missus Conners’ age, he might have stolen one of her pies in the past. The disappointment at having to wait a week seemed small and there was a bounce in his step.

***

“Can I talk with you, Master?” Harrold asked as Nicholas entered his room in Blue Moon House. It was only his second night alone with Nicholas, although he had joined him and another man and another woman over the week.

“Of course,” Nicholas said, walking to sit with Harrold on the edge of

the bed. “What would you like to talk about?”
Harrold felt odd sitting naked while Nicholas wore pants, but he had been instructed to undress as soon as he came to the room. “I have some good news and no one to share it with.”
Nicholas smiled. “I love sharing good news. Please, tell me.”
“My wife. She finally discovered, and shared with me, that she prefers women.”
“Oh,” Nicholas said, smile slipping. “That doesn't sound like good news for you.”
“Oh, but it is!” Harry shifted on the bed, excitement getting the better of him. “She has been so much happier and easier to live with since I gave her Kendra.”
“A slave,” Nicholas said.
“Yes. She was a client of Lynn's when I met her.”
Nicholas relaxed even more. “Ah. So she's not surprised by her role in your house.”
“No, actually she's quite happy as well. She prefers women, too.”
Nicholas clasped Harrold's shoulder. “That is good news. Again, you seem very happy for someone else's happiness.”
“I suppose. Kendra prefers women, but she will indulge me. Once this week, I came home to hear something I didn't think possible, my wife in orgasm. Another night, I stole Kendra to the pantry for myself before the girl went to my wife. She is marvelous.”
“I am glad you are finding happiness at home. Now, what shall we do? Did you enjoy your evening with Michael?”
Harry nodded. “More than I expected to. It feels less unnatural to fuck a man. After all, I have used whore's assholes in the past.”
“Less unnatural,” Nicholas mused. “Less than being fucked.”
Harry blushed and nodded. That hadn't happened since the first night with Nicholas.
“Well, then that is where we will start. Would you like me to tie you?”
Harry's heart doubled its pace with a mixture of fear and anticipation. It had felt good last time. Binding him should make that better. Also, it would prevent him from reflexively rejecting Nicholas. “Yes,” he said nodding. “I think that's a good idea.”

Nicholas moved to the wardrobe and removed the harness he had used on Donna. Harry took a step back. His Master chuckled. “We'll only be tying your hands,” he explained, opening the smallest bands of leather.

Harry nodded and took a step closer to Nicholas, placing him directly under the hook in the ceiling. Once the cuffs were secure on his wrists, the rope was used to pull Harry's arms up. He wasn't stretched, but he couldn't lower his arms either.

“Not too high?” Nicholas checked, returning to the wardrobe.

“No, Master,” Harry agreed.

Nicholas returned with a crystal decanter of pale gold liquid. “Good.” He moved behind Harry's back and Harry tried to look over his own shoulder. He felt the liquid poured over his ass, but it wasn't until Nicholas ran his fingers through it that Harry identified it as oil, probably olive by the smell.

“Planning to roast me?” Harry asked, joking.

“Don't make me gag you,” Nicholas said, laughter in his voice as well. “I'm hoping to get you hot, though.” He put his lips to Harry's ear, nibbling the lobe. At the same time his fingers roamed over Harry's ass, cupping, pulling.

Nicholas pressed one finger in and Harry rose to his toes. The whole digit must have been in him because he could feel the rest of the hand on his cheeks. It had been effortless, slipping through easily. And it felt good, much better than anything before. Nicholas pulled the finger out and slipped it back in again, stroking slowly.

Harry fell into the rhythm and leaned back into Nicholas' hand, enjoying the feeling. His cock stiffened, longing for more bites from Nicholas, thicker fingers in his ass. The second was granted first. Nicholas moved to stand behind him, and pulled Harry's hips toward him.

Harry could feel the thick head of Nicholas' cock pressing against him, into him. It couldn't slip past, his hole not ready to accommodate his girth. However, the longer Nicholas stroked and pressed, the more Harry opened until suddenly, with no warning to either of them, the head slipped past and half of the shaft behind it followed smoothly.

Harry closed his eyes at the fullness. It was much more than the last time they had done this. He had the impression that only Nicholas' tip had penetrated him that time. Nicholas didn't move, but Harry leaned back, urging more of the cock into him, stretching deeper into himself. It still didn't hurt; in fact, it felt better, like something inside him was being stroked by the head of the cock. Experimenting, he leaned forward again.

Nicholas' grip tightened. “If you want fucking,” he said, pushing into Harry, “I can arrange that.” He pulled out most of the way, then pushed in again. The oil was quickly thinning, but Harry wouldn't need many strokes.

“Good. So very good. Ugh,” He groaned and felt his cock throb.

“Yes, you hold me tighter than any pussy, any mouth. You feel fantastic.” Nicholas pulled Harry's hips until they touched his own. Once they were pressed together, he bit into Harry's shoulder, drinking heavily from the wound.

The racing of his pulse sent the magical element straight to Harry's brain and he erupted, shooting his seed across the room and onto the wardrobe. Nicholas paused drinking long enough to compliment his range and accuracy before sucking up more blood. Harry was kept from moving far by Nicholas' hands on his hips, but he was able to rock, able to rub the head of the cock inside him. He felt his body tighten in a second orgasm even though his cock was limp. He cried out as the sensations ripped through him.

Gasping for breath, he noticed how much darker the room seemed. Nicholas was drinking too much. “Red,” he murmured, sinking in the vampire's arms.

“Shit,” Nicholas cursed, balancing Harry's limp weight on one arm while pulling the rope to unravel his knot. He picked Harry up, just as he had Donna, and placed him atop the sheets of the bed. He unbuckled the cuffs in moments and fled the room. He returned with a large tumbler full of water and propped Harry up to drink from it.

Harry nearly passed out when Nicholas lifted him, stars floating across his vision.

“Drink,” Nicholas ordered. “You need to replenish your blood. Drink,

and I will bring you meat next."
Harry slurped the water, feeling some of it spill down his chest. Blessedly, Nicholas let him lie back then and he closed his eyes. When he opened them next, Nicholas and Lynn sat on the bed watching him. Both sighed in relief when he began to prop himself up.
"How late is it?" he asked.
"Late enough that there is no point in you going home," Lynn said. "You can wear one of Terrance's suits tomorrow."
"Here, eat this," Nicholas urged, setting a plate in his lap. The meat and bread had been placed together in such a tempting array that he devoured it quickly, gobbling more before swallowing the last of his water. He almost choked and was presented with another large tumbler of water.
"Drink all of that," Lynn reminded him. "You lost a lot of blood."
Nicholas looked sheepish. "You have my apologies for that."
Harry shook his head. "No, I'm fine. Thank you."
"Rest, Harry," Lynn said, brushing a hand over his curls. "We'll make sure you get to the office tomorrow."
Happily, he closed his eyes and relived some of his most memorable nights in this House.

***

Kendra was found in his bed every night that week. He decided to pay Delores for Kendra immediately, absorbing the cost of two slaves until Mister Conners returned. It was good luck when he came home early. He came into the office to speak with Harrold and secure the paperwork for the new slave.
"I didn't want to replace Fanny. She was a good old girl, but well, things have been slipping since her eyesight failed. I know my missus will be happy for the extra hands."
"Of course. I wouldn't let Polly go, but I have found this new girl, Kendra, who suits my wife and me better. Now I just have to convince my mother she is good enough."
Mister Conners smiled in agreement. "It's hard for older folks to accept

change. How is your mother?"
"She has good days and bad days," Harrold said, leaning back in his chair. "More bad of late. I know she misses my father, but she doesn't say anything."
"It's a shame women outlive us so long. Doesn't help that we marry them so young." He clapped Harrold on the shoulder. "I'll just swing by your house and pick up Polly."
"That would be great. I know she's eager for the move."
"Sara wouldn't stop talking my lady's ear off about it. Made sure she told me as soon as I got in."
"Well, I'm glad. I couldn't afford to keep both of them much longer. I'd have had to sell Polly to a less pleasing owner. She really is thrilled to be joining your house."
Harrold hurried home from work, knowing his wife and mother would already have the news. On the spot, he decided to stay home that night from Blue Moon House. He wasn't expected and he thought watching the women might be just the celebration he wanted.
"You look like the cat that got the canary," his mother said over dinner. "What are you grinning about? Costing me the best girl I ever had? I trained her, Harrold, from the wee thing her mother introduced me to, and you sent her away."
"Oh, Mother, Kendra here is every bit as wonderful as Polly. Just give her a chance." He patted the slave's shoulder and kissed his mother's cheek. "Don't be cross."
"I...I seem to have lost my appetite. Kendra, take me to my room." Kendra dipped her knees before complying, giving Harrold a look of concern.
His mother did seem more frail. A month ago, she could stand to miss a meal or two. Now her skin seemed to hang a little more slack.
"Has Mother said anything to you about her health?"
Veronica set down her silverware. "No, but it is obvious the news of Polly leaving has done her ill. Maybe we shouldn't have bought Kendra."
"You don't really believe that."
"I'm thrilled that you have indulged me so, but Mother doesn't have

that many years left. Surely something else could have been arranged."

"So I could pay a whore for a slave and then buy her afterward? That hardly seems sensible."

Veronica frowned. "No, I suppose not. I'm worried about her, Harrold."

"She's a strong woman. She'll adjust." They both ate a while before he spoke again. "I thought I might stay home tonight."

Veronica's fork slipped from her fingers, clattering against her plate. "What?"

"I thought I might stay in. Maybe take a book into the bedroom for the night."

"A book?" she asked, watching him sidewise. "You plan to read?"

"Well, pretend to read, yes."

She set the knife down more carefully and he noticed her hands shaking. "I'm not sure I'm ready for that, Harrold."

He frowned. "No? I really was hoping to enjoy Kendra in some fashion to celebrate Polly's sale. I no longer have a lien on the house, thank God."

"Indeed. I'm glad the bank was willing to let you do that."

"I'm glad Delores Peche didn't gouge me for Kendra's price."

Veronica smiled. "It really did work out for the best, didn't it? You actually made a little money on the sale."

"No, that went to the interest on the lien. But we didn't lose anything. And look what we gained." He grinned, looking to the door to the kitchen where Kendra hovered in case they needed anything with their meal.

"Indeed. Harrold, she makes me right giddy most days." Her smile, something he had little enjoyed in the past, seemed to beam.

"Like the beautiful girl I married," he said, chucking a finger under her chin and kissing her lips lightly. "You have no idea how happy I am to see you so."

She blushed a little and tried to pick up her fork again. Harrold stopped her, holding her hand.

"I do want to watch you tonight. I can sit somewhere you are less

likely to see me, on the side rather than the foot. Would that work?"
Veronica began to tremble again. "I suppose that might work. Harrold, I'm scared of what you'll think when you see me...in that state."
He felt himself twitch in his pants. "Veronica, I have waited years to see you in that state. I have longed to see it. Believe me when I say you will be even more beautiful in my eyes."
She blushed again. "How can you love me so when I have returned so little care to you?"
"Because when we were young, I saw the warm heart you cased in ice. I've known it was there all along, waiting for the right hand to melt it again."
"Who knew it would be a black one!" she said with a laugh.
He chuckled along with her and didn't bring up the evening again, letting her enjoy her meal in peace. He remained in the parlor with his pipe for a good hour after Kendra had taken Veronica to prepare for bed. Upon tapping out the ash, he unbuttoned his jacket and shirt, prepared to doff both upon entering the bedroom.
He was careful to open the door quietly, and as he had hoped, the ladies weren't facing his way. He leaned against the door and dropped clothing in a heap. He had admired Kendra's beautiful dark skin, but he wasn't prepared for the sight of her long black legs twined with Veronica's white ones. It looked like cream in coffee, a drink he rarely enjoyed. They swirled around one another, making it nearly impossible to tell where one ended and the other began except for those solid lines of white on black. Kendra's dark fingers splayed over one of Veronica's white breasts. Veronica's white toes against Kendra's round black ass cheek.
He opened his fly and began stroking himself immediately. He'd shared women, even Kendra, with Lynn, so he'd seen women together, but there was something different about this. Kendra's dark lips on Veronica's bright pink ones. It wasn't mistress and slave. They were making love, just as he had always wanted to do with Veronica. Instead, he had overpowered her twice, forcing his seed into her while she screamed at him. Twice had been twice more than he wanted. He wanted what he saw. He wanted the perfect blending of bodies. How

could he ever have that? Veronica could never share this with him. Kendra? Could she be equal to both of them in the bedroom?

Waiting, he watched until Veronica's flush and cry showed him the secret beauty of the woman he married. He was jealous of Kendra. His inability to please his wife coupled with having sex with men made him feel inferior. In his rage, he leapt from the shadows and pinned the black girl face down on the bed.

“You would ravish my wife?” he said, nearly growling.

“Yes, sir. As often as possible,” Kendra admitted.

“You think this is a game?”

“Harrold!” Veronica pushed him off her lover.

“You stay out of this. You...” Abruptly he felt ashamed and rolled onto his back, feeling tears in his eyes. He really shouldn't let Nicholas fuck him. He was turning into a woman.

“Sir?” Kendra said, pushing up on her side and propping on her elbow. “Shall I ravish you next?”

His eyes narrowed, confused. Who was this creature? She wasn't the docile slave that served the house. She wasn't the submissive child he'd shared with Lynn. “Who are you?”

“I'm whatever you need me to be. I think right now, you need me to be this.” She climbed onto him, rubbing herself along his still stiff cock. She was so wet, sopping. He took hold of her hips and drove himself up into her.

She arched her back, lips splitting to reveal bright white teeth in a beautiful smile. “Yes.”

Harrold shifted his hands, holding both of her breasts. Veronica gasped beside him, covering her mouth. For a moment he worried that he'd scared her. He wasn't attacking Kendra any longer. In fact, it seemed the slave was attacking him, riding him vigorously, covering his hands with her own.

Veronica's long thin fingers covered one of Kendra's hands. “So beautiful,” she murmured.

Harry smiled, remembering how he enjoyed watching them a moment ago. “Kiss her,” he told his wife.

She stared at him for a moment in shock. Kendra was getting closer to

a climax, biting her lips and rolling her hips to rub herself on him. Veronica had to be able to see that as well. Once she did, she looked away from Harrold and stretched up to take Kendra's face in her hands, kissing her. Harrold watched two pink tongues tangle between pink and black lips. He felt himself building just as Kendra dropped his hands and put her palms to his pectorals, bracing as pleasure washed over her. Harrold erupted into her, crying out as she did.

Veronica only gave Kendra a moment before resuming the kiss, pulling the girl from Harrold's lap and into her own again.

Harrold opened a little space, rolling onto his side to watch the women play.

“You two...might kill me,” Kendra murmured.

“You'll die happy,” Harrold teased, brushing away curly black hair from Kendra's straight back, Veronica's fingers dancing over it.

“Indeed!” she said, gasping.

***

Despite a fantastic night, Harrold couldn't sleep. He kept thinking about Kendra and Veronica, who shared the bed while he got the trundle that night. Although Kendra had been quick to meet him, he didn't feel like her equal, didn't feel they made love. They fucked.

How was he to find an equal? Certainly it was impossible inside Blue Moon House. Should he take a lover? Someone like the widow Pearson. Not her. She would always see him as a businessman she used at her whim. Someone similar though?

It was the dead of night when he rolled out of the trundle and pulled on pants and a jacket, neglecting his shirt. On Baker Street, he raised the knocker.

He didn't wait long for an answer, but the woman seemed surprised to be answering. “Hello?” She wore a robe, similar to the ones Lynn wore, but in a bright shade of blue. It accentuated her sapphire eyes as well as her creamy white skin. Her raven black hair curled over her shoulders.

“May I come in? I need to talk to Nicholas or Lynn.”

“Mister Long,” she said in recognition, “of course, come in.”
The House was the quietest he'd ever heard it. Not a sound came from the main floor.
“I'm afraid we'd all retired for the night. Everyone down here is asleep.”
“Oh,” he said disappointed. “I shouldn't have come. I'll go.”
“No, wait. I can fetch one of them, though they are likely occupied,” she said, smirking and rolling her eyes to the ceiling. Just then a floorboard squeaked. The woman frowned. “I've told them not to put the bed there.” There was a scuffling noise and no more squeaking. She nodded and smiled.
“Can they hear you?”
“If they listen, yes. I expect they don't want to hear the squeaking any more than I do.”
“Oh.” Harrold paced, not sure he'd made the right choice in coming here.
“Would you talk with me?” she asked.
He sighed quietly. “That might be better, actually. It's an odd request. One I'm not sure either of them can help me with. “You are Sophia, right?” he asked.
“Yes.”
“It is wonderful to meet you.” He took her hand and kissed the knuckles.
She smiled. “It is good to meet you as well. You impressed Will the other day. Not an easy thing to do.”
Harry shrugged. “I did what seemed asked of me. Sophia, I bought a slave that was a client of Lynn's.”
“Yes? I had heard about that.”
“Well, she and my wife, they are very happy.”
“I'm glad,” Sophia said, moving to take a seat. Harry finally noticed he was still pacing around the room and took a seat across from her. When she crossed her legs, despite the robe, his attention went to her leg.
“Harry?” she asked, pulling his eyes back to hers. “Is there a problem?”

“Yes. I want what they have.”
Sophia frowned. “I don't think I understand. You have a man, Nicholas __”
“No,” Harrold interrupted. “I don't want sex with another man, although I'm enjoying that rather more than I expected. No, I want to make love like they do. I want to be happy like they are. They are partners in a way I always thought a husband and wife would be.”
“But she's still a slave.” Something in Sophia's expression and tone told Harrold that she was one of the growing number that found buying and selling people repugnant. Certainly, since meeting Kendra, he had begun to be swayed to their way of thinking. She wasn't an animal. Neither was Veronica, yet women were treated hardly better than slaves. Perhaps that was why they could be equals?
“Yes, but there is still something they share, when alone, that I don't think I've ever known.”
“Love,” she said, frowning. “It is the one thing we can't give here. We love you all, don't misunderstand, but we can't be in love with you. You all leave us, one by one.”
“But you have each other. Are you equals?”
There was a rustling and Harrold turned to see Nicholas in the doorway. “Hello, Harry,” he said when Harry spied him.
“Hello. You heard?”
He nodded. He walked over to Sophia and kissed her gently, tenderly.
“We are equals, Harry. I don't think you're ready to join us, though.”
His eyes widened. “I could...be one of you?”
“We must procreate in some fashion.” Lynn's voice startled him and he turned again to see her. She didn't even wear a robe, walking to Nicholas' side clad only in her hair. “We can't have children, but we can change people.”
Harry leaned back in his chair. “I never thought of that.”
Lynn continued. “I asked you once, Harry, if you wanted children. You were quite cynical then, but I can tell you aren't so now.”
“No. However, my wife will not have it, so I suppose I won't either.”
“You could have other women.” The voice was less familiar and Harry only placed it once Terrance joined the group before him. He stood on

Sophia's other side, stroking her hair. “They might bear you a child.”
“A bastard child is hardly the same. And I have no desire to be a father.”
“I don't think he's ready.” The deep voice resonated in Harry's chest and he was fairly sure it must belong to Will. “He could be an equal, but he has something holding him back.”
“Mother,” he murmured. “She is old and ill, but surely I could care for her—?”
“If you were to join us,” Sophia said as Will took a place beside Terrance. The five of them did look like one unit, close. “You would have to leave your world behind. For the same reason we swear everyone here to secrecy, you would be unable to return to your life.”
Harry nodded in understanding. It would certainly be strange if he suddenly stopped eating or sleeping. “What would you do? Stage my death?”
“A disappearance,” Nicholas said. “You go on a trip and neither arrive at your destination nor return. It's usually simpler.”
Harry nodded again. It made sense. However, there was the matter of Mother. “Well, thank you. Nicholas, I will return tomorrow.”
Nicholas stayed, standing next to him while the others left. “Excellent. I have you to myself again tomorrow. What kept you tonight? Donna was pouting.”
Harry snorted. “No she wasn't. She still doesn't like me.”
Nicholas laughed. “No, though I can't understand why not. You certainly make her feel fantastic.” It was like his conversations with Lynn after spending time with another client. He didn't feel inferior.
“Am I still the slave?” he asked, confused.
“For the moment. I think as soon as you accepted Lynn's judgement, you started to slip out of that. You started to think like us, see the client instead of yourself.”
Harrold nodded. That had been the case.
“You know what that means, right?” Harrold didn't. “That you're ready for a client of your own.” Nicholas clapped his back. “Once you become one of us, you will need to feed like us.”
“Would you believe the possibility never occurred to me?”

“Really?” Nicholas asked, surprised. “You seemed like such a bright man.”

“Apparently not. Well, I should get home. Get some clothes on before morning.”

“You poor, working men. I'm off to romp with my friends and rest for a few hours.”

Harry had no response to that, but it did spark another question. “All of you? All five?”

Nicholas grinned broadly. “That is the best part.”

Harry smiled too, imagining it. It sounded like just the place he wanted to be.

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CHAPTER EIGHT – LOVE

“Mister Long? Mister Long, please wake up.”
He had fallen asleep in the parlor after leaving work early. He started at Kendra's voice full of panic.
“Yes? What is it?”
“It's your mother, sir. She...I think she's dead.”
Harrold jumped from his chair. “Where is Veronica? Does she know?”
Kendra hurried to keep up as he raced to his mother's room. “No. I came to you first.”
“Go. Tell her,” he ordered, not pausing. Throwing open the door, it crashed into the wall beside it. Surging forward, he leaned on the edge of the bed.
“Mother!” he shouted, shaking her shoulder. “Mother, wake up. Tell us what's wrong. Mother?”
“Harrold? Is it true?” Veronica asked.
“It seems to be. Kendra, go fetch the doctor,” he called to the servant as he wife came to his side. She touched his mother's wrinkled cheek.
“She's still warm,” Veronica said, slapping the cheek with small force. “But she's not waking up. Oh, Harrold, I'm so sorry,” she said, tears coming to her eyes as she hugged him from the side.
He wrapped his arm around his wife's shaking shoulders. He felt a strange calm. “I think she's happy now.”
Veronica sniffled, digging a handkerchief out of a pocket. “What?”
“I think...she's gone to Father. She's happier now.”
Veronica blew her nose quietly. “You're probably right. She had been having such a hard time. I just worry that buying Kendra pushed her to it.”
Harrold stroked her arm. “Nonsense. She didn't kill herself. Look at her. She passed in her sleep.” His mother still had a sleeping cap on, though the shaking and slapping had left it askew. He pulled it

straight.
Veronica stayed with him, watching, while they waited for Kendra and the doctor. It was a formality, and as they waited, Harrold began planning a funeral and burial.
“I'm very sorry for your loss, Mister Long, Missus Long,” the doctor said, shaking each of their hands before leaving again.
“Kendra, stay with Veronica. I have arrangements to make.”
“Tonight?” Veronica asked. “Isn't it too late?”
Harrold shook his head. “I can get a hold of a few people still tonight. I won't be gone long.” He was able to reach the undertaker before he had sat to supper, and the man agreed to pick up Mother after he had eaten. From there, Harrold went to the church, the manse specifically, and shared the news there. The pastor gave him a date for a funeral. The major points dealt with, Harrold went home. He arrived at the same time as the undertaker and helped him and his assistant carry out the body.
He kissed his mother's brow as they set her in the back of the covered cart. “Goodbye, Mother.”
“We'll take care of her, sir. She'll be pretty as Sunday for her service.”
Harrold nodded and shook the undertaker's hand. It wouldn't take more than a bit of makeup for her to look alive again.
He entered the dining room to find Veronica sitting to an untouched plate.
“Something wrong?” he asked, kissing her before waving Kendra to bring his plate. It had been kept warm in the kitchen.
“She's dead. One minute alive, the next dead.”
“That's the way of life, I suppose.” He began cutting into his pork.
“It really doesn't bother you?” she asked.
He chewed before answering. “No. It was strange, standing over her. It really felt as though she were bidding us farewell.”
“You know what she would have wanted. A grandbaby.”
Harrold sighed and patted her hand. “Nothing has changed there, Veronica. It will be well. My sister can inherit when we have no children.”
“I could try,” she insisted. “I think I've gotten better.”

“Kendra, can you come in a moment?”
The slave came to his side, folding hands on her apron. “Yes, sir?”
“Does my wife still have an obstruction?”
She shifted deep brown eyes from Mister to Missus Long and back. “Yes, sir.”
“I thought so. We aren't going have any children as long as that is the case. I couldn't sire them and you couldn't bear them. Don't worry, love. It doesn't bother me.”
She sighed heavily and sat back in her chair. “Well, it doesn't help my appetite.”
He chuckled. “I think I know something that might. Kendra, would you take Missus Long to bed and get her hungry. I'll put the plate back on the warm stove.” Rising, he did just that. When he returned, the ladies hadn't even moved to the bedroom, Kendra raking her fingers over Veronica's exposed skin.
He kissed each lady's cheek as he passed. “Enjoy yourselves. I'll be late if I make it back before morning.” Despite losing his mother that day, he headed for Blue Moon House, whistling as he walked.
Harry sat in the parlor, admiring the portraits of the vampires. He could recognize all of them now, despite old fashions, different hair styles. He waited for Nicholas to call on him. It would be Donna again tonight. He wrinkled his nose. He didn't know how he had stepped wrong, but that woman did not like him. Perhaps she was so possessive of Nicholas, she hated to share. What would she do if she knew he had five other clients in addition to her, and that was before counting Harrold?
“Come on,” Nicholas said, appearing naked in the doorway. “And start pulling that off.” He took hold of Harry's jacket, taking it from him. His shirt was unbuttoned and his trousers fell around his knees when he reached the door. He stepped out of the clothing, kicking it into the room. What would Nicholas have Donna doing today?
He rubbed his hands together when he found her, arms outstretched, eyes blindfolded, turning in slow circles in the middle of the room. Nicholas closed the door ever so softly.
“Master?”

“Yes, Donna, I'm still here. Why haven't you found me yet?”
Harry suppressed laughter as the woman moved, arms outstretched. Then Nicholas pushed Harry toward her.
“Ah, there you are,” she said, wrapping her arms around Harry. “No...you aren't. You two are playing with me again.” She pouted.
“I'm sorry, Donna, but you are so much fun to play with.” Nicholas pressed against her back until her breasts were crushed on Harry's chest. This was new. Usually they took opposite ends of her, not front and back.
“Lift your legs. Wrap them around him. You know he feels good inside you. You know you like that.”
“Hmm,” Donna murmured, unconvinced. Harry, following Nicholas' instruction, took her legs in his hands and lifted. She wrapped her arms around his neck reflexively, trying to hold on against falling.
“Don't enter her, Harry,” Nicholas warned. He was to the wardrobe and back faster than thought, and poured familiar oil down Donna's back. It curled under her and dripped onto his quickly stiffening cock.
“Do you remember this, Donna?” Nicholas asked, pulling her hips down enough to touch her tight puckered ass to his cock. “Would you like this?”
She gasped at the touch and shifted her weight. Harry had to adjust his stance and hold to keep her from falling on Nicholas. Instead, he imagined, Nicholas' cock was beginning to open her.
“Yes,” she hissed. “Yes, Master.”
Harry continued to watch for Nicholas' visual cues. He rarely used verbal ones with Harry. It made them a better team in instances like this, where one party was blind. Nicholas took more of Donna's weight and she slowly fell over him, sheathing him in her ass. At the signal, Harry began to pull Donna's weight back toward him, taking her off the cock filling her. Then Nicholas took her back. It was slow fucking, very careful, shifting her weight so gently. She started to groan and twitch her hips, obviously wanting more stimulation.
Harry's eyes widened at Nicholas' instruction. He'd seen whores do that, but Donna wasn't a whore. Wouldn't she be torn? Nicholas frowned at his hesitation and Harry moved swiftly before he could

rouse any ire. Donna was shifted almost completely onto Nicholas when Harry thrust into her, driving her back even farther.

She started to scream, but Nicholas muffled her as Harry took hold of her again. “Shhh. Feel.”

“Oh, so full, so tight. Don't move. Don't either of you move.”

Nicholas quirked an eyebrow. He made sure Harry had hold of her weight completely and then thrust out and in. She cried again. Nicholas took her weight and it was Harry's turn. He caught on to the method quickly and they started shifting her between them more quickly, each making one stroke against the other.

Harry had felt Nicholas' cock many times before, in his mouth, in his ass. Once they had rubbed their cocks against one another. This was something else. It was like Nicholas was fucking his cock, thrusting up along it. On his thrusts, it was the opposite, like he was delving into Nicholas, when they were actually plumbing Donna.

Her cries became more shrill, filled with more heat, until she arched and thrust her hips madly for a moment, taking both Harry and Nicholas just a little bit deeper, and collapsed onto Harry, clinging to him.

“Don't let me go,” she panted. “Don't drop me.”

There was a risk of that. Harry had just erupted inside her and his knees were a bit shaky. Nicholas, of course, had more than enough strength to cup her bottom and take enough weight that Harry could move. He edged to the bed and lay down, Donna still draped over him.

“You did marvelous, love,” Nicholas told her as he removed the blindfold.

“That...that...never.” She didn't make sense, but she didn't need to. She needed to rest and most strange of all, she seemed happy to curl up atop Harry.

“Stroke her hair,” Nicholas said, sneering. “You never held a woman before?”

His face wrinkled at the suggestion and Harry immediately shifted to holding her, stroking her, rubbing her arms and legs to make her warmer, more comfortable.

Harry nearly jumped up when he heard the door close. He lifted his head to see that their Master was no longer in the room.
“He's gone,” he whispered to Donna. “You don't have to pretend.”
“Pretend?” she asked, seeming lost in blissful peace. “I'm not pretending anything. You, sir, are too handsome by far.” She nuzzled into his neck. “Resisting you when my master is here has been too difficult. I'm finished pretending.”
Harry froze, hand on her head. “What?”
“Please. What would he say if I had chosen you? He's my Master. I belong to him.”
“Oh.” Nicholas didn't return, and once Donna was snoring quietly, Harry rolled her off him and covered her with the blanket. Then, pulling on trousers, he wandered into the hall.
“Nicholas?”
He came around a corner. “She asleep? I'm so glad. I think, when you join us, you should take Donna for your first. She'll love that.”
“What?” He was getting dizzy from all the surprises dropped on him.
“Come with me,” he said, leading Harry around the corner he had come from. There was a stairwell that led to the second floor. It seemed the second floor was all one room, one furnished with three beds and a number of dressing tables and wardrobes. Here, he could see, was where the women and men prepared themselves.
Also here were Lynn and Sophia, tangled in one another's arms. It wasn't quite as breathtaking as watching Kendra and Veronica, but it came close, and they were much less reserved in their lovemaking.
“Harry,” Lynn said smiling. She extracted herself from Sophia only for Nicholas to take her place, thrusting in where Lynn had been using fingers. She pulled him to another bed and straddled his waist. “It has been too long, Harry.”
“Uh, yes,” he agreed. It then dawned on him. “It's been a month.”
“Only just,” Nicholas agreed.
“May I?” Harry hadn't seen Terrance enter, but he was behind Lynn now and leaned her forward over Harry. For the second time that night, he felt another man's cock thrusting against his own. Lynn was the conduit by which they stimulated each other. She was the crucible

that fired their passions and melted them together into something more potent. She lasted much longer than Donna, but eventually she was writhing on them as they erupted into her.

The two vampires rolled away and a black hand seized one of his own, pulling him to his feet. Harry stumbled at the force of the pull, nearly falling. He caught his balance and looked up into Will's smiling face.

“I see that he is spent.” He looked down at Harry's flaccid cock, then he reached around and cupped his ass cheeks. “Can I pleasure you here?” He kissed Harry while his fingers played up and down Harry's crack. Will was even more adept than Nicholas, and Harry was eager for the oil he produced. He turned around, facing away from the black man, and was delighted to see pairings in front of him. Nicholas with Lynn, Terrance with Sophia, each reaching for the other. Terrance stood, letting Lynn join Sophia atop Nicholas. He took one woman on his hips and the other on his face while they fondled each other. Harry didn't get to see much more as Terrance filled his vision, walking up to him and taking hold of his no longer flagging penis.

“You look good enough to eat,” he said as Will continued to move slowly in and out of him, hands twisting Harry's nipples.

Terrance's kissed him, stroking as he did. Then his mouth slid lower, biting into the side of Harry's neck. He nearly cried out in pain, but that was so quickly washed out in the pleasure of the vampire's saliva. Will shifted his mouth to Harry's shoulder, biting into it on the opposite side. Harry thrashed between them just as Lynn and Donna had. He spurt hot white ejaculate on both his and Terrance's bellies just as Will throbbed inside him, releasing as well.

Will didn't let go, and that was for the best. Harry passed out, collapsing into their arms.

***

“I have some business to attend out of town,” Harrold told Veronica over breakfast. “I'll be needed in Dover for a few days.”

“Oh,” she said, surprised. “You will take the carriage, then?”

It had been several weeks since his mother's funeral and he had no ties

left besides his lovely wife. He had spent other nights in the secret second floor of Blue Moon House and was ready to spend the rest of his life there, a life that wouldn't end. He would miss this Veronica, the happy one. Knowing that Kendra would keep her happy gave him the freedom to go.

“No, Cooper has rented one for me.”

“Good. I was hoping to use it to visit my mother.”

“You'll take Kendra with you?”

“Why wouldn't I?” Veronica asked.

Harry shrugged. “Because you don't want to be found out.”

Veronica blushed. “Do you remember my mother's friend Iris? How inseparable they were?”

Harry laughed loudly, making the tea in their cups shake. “Really?”

“I'm almost positive,” Veronica said, eating another bite. “I think she won't be as scandalized as we might have thought.”

He worked to gain control of his laughter. How had he not put the pieces together himself? He was in such a wonderful place, another person might wonder why he wanted to leave it. “I'll be leaving today, Veronica.” His laughter burned away, serious matters taking his intention. “You know where things are if you need anything while I'm gone?”

She waved him off. “I'll be fine, Harrold. You set your mind to business.”

“Thank you,” he said, rising. He kissed her cheek, then took her chin and kissed her lips. She didn't fight away, and even flicked her tongue out to touch his lip. “Tease,” he said. “I will miss you.”

“It's only a few days, right? Besides, you'll find ladies in Dover.”

“Of course. Kendra, would you bring my bag from the bedroom?” He had packed it after Veronica had dressed. It was nearly empty, leaving most everything for Veronica.

She met him in the entry, handing him the valise.

“Good bye, Kendra. Take good care of her.” He brushed the slave's cheek, round and pulled up in a perpetual smile.

“I always do,” she said, being cheeky.

He grinned with her and kissed her quickly, a mere peck, before

walking out the door. It was time for a new life, in a place he was loved.

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Angelica Dawson, best selling Naughty Nights Press author, has been writing for several years and having sex a lot longer than that. Her love of plants and the outdoors is not diminished by the bloodsucking hoards—mosquitoes and black flies, not vampires.

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Angie and her vampire sisters are happy, making their lives in the modern world after escaping from their abusive Creator, Vitalis. Jake is a mortal man who has fallen hard for Angie, unaware of her secret and just how it affects his own life. Their lives, however, are about to be thrown into chaos. Has Vitalis really found the sisters after all these years, just as Angie finds love?

Preparing to battle for their freedom and the life of their sister, Angie must ready herself. Not only must she take on the father she once loved, but she also must choose between the mortal life she wanted with Jake, or to protect vampires and humans alike from an unknown, ancient threat.

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The Return Of Their Master by Phoenix Johnson
ISBN: 978-1-927415-94-8
First Edition 2014
Edited by A.C. Howard
Published by: Naughty Nights Press
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The Return of Their Master by Phoenix Johnson

PROLOGUE

The couple drove along the deserted road in silence, windshield wipers providing the only sound. The road ahead was lit by the car's high beams, the bright lights occasionally catching the eyes of deer poking their heads out of the forest lining the tarmac.

They'd left the restaurant later than usual since the young woman had stayed at work for annual stocktaking. The later hour meant they were the only ones on the road. As the man steered the automatic car, the couple held hands and enjoyed each other's company.

"What is that?" The man leaned over the steering wheel, squinting to make out the lump in the road in front of them. He slowed the car down and navigated to the shoulder of the road.

"I think it's an animal," the woman replied in a quiet whisper. They both got out of the car to have a closer look and saw it was just an old, grey blanket that looked like the body of an injured creature. "Thank goodness for that."

He picked up the blanket gently, making sure there was no surprise underneath the folds. Shaking it out as best he could, the man took the sodden bedspread to the trunk to dispose of properly, and they both returned to the warm, dry comfort of the car's interior. As they settled in their seats and buckled their seatbelts, the pair heard an awful screech as headlights flashed in their eyes, blinding them. As the lights swept over them and left them in the dark once more, the couple realized with horror that a truck had lost traction on the slippery road and jack-knifed. The large vehicle was now bearing down on them, carried by its own momentum.

"We have to get out of here." The man hastened to unclip his seatbelt as the woman rushed to do the same, both realizing it was futile trying to drive out of range. Before they could open the car doors, however, the

semi's trailer swung the truck around and swept the car along with it, taking it across the road where it spun into a tree.

***

Unsure how long she had been unconscious, the woman's eyes fluttered open and she looked around the cabin of the car. Feeling no pain, she sat up straighter as memories of the accident came back to her.

"Jake!" She grabbed the arm of the man in the driver's seat and gently shook him. He groaned and she sighed in relief. He was alive at least. Taking a moment to inspect her own body, she noticed a few large cuts over her torso from the broken windshield. No major injuries, so she turned back to inspect Jake. As she checked him over, she felt the telltale itch of skin knitting back together and new skin growing from underneath. Suddenly, she was incredibly grateful for her condition.

Jake's face was pale, his skin cool and clammy. He wasn't in good shape. Checking his pulse, she frowned at how weak it was.

"Angie," a weak mutter escaped his lips, blue from lack of blood. Licking her own, she knew there was no way an ambulance would reach them in time to save him. She wasn't even sure she'd get enough call reception to reach an emergency dispatcher. She shook her head as her heart pounded in her chest. There was only one thing she could do to save the life of this man she had fallen in love with.

Brushing a strand of his long black hair out of his eyes, the woman gazed down upon him and heaved a sigh. There was no way she could live without him. She could deal with the consequences.

Her mind made up, Angie leaned down toward Jake's face and kissed his lips one last time before doing what needed to be done.

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CHAPTER ONE

As I reached to adjust some earrings on the rack, he grabbed my wrist, pulling me around to face him.

“I meant what I said, Angie.” His eyes were earnest as always and my heart ached, wanting to wrap my arms around his neck and hold him forever. Instead, I just pulled my arm back and moved to the next rack.

“I know you did Jake, but things are just so complicated and busy right now. I couldn’t possibly take any time off. Even just for dinner.” I turned to him so he understood I did mean what I said next. “I enjoy spending time with you, I really do. We have a special friendship that I cherish dearly, but time together is going to have to wait, I’m sorry. My sisters really need my help looking after the store right now.”

He moved in closer. “You know it’s not just friendship I’m interested in, and I know it’s more than that to you, too. Don’t try to deny it.” My heart pounded and oh how I wanted to tell him he was right.

Jake spoke loud enough that people started to pay attention to us. “I love you, Evangeline. I can’t hold it back anymore, and I don’t think you should hide from your feelings anymore either. I want to marry you. I want to spend the rest of our lives together. Tell me you feel the same.”

I glanced around and saw everyone in the store, and even a few outside, were all looking at me, waiting for a response. My mouth flapped open and shut as a war raged inside of me. I desperately wanted to say yes but doing so would risk his life, of that I had no doubt. There was no way I was going to let him die for his love, a love that could never be acted upon.

It was my turn to grab his wrist, dragging him behind me as I marched him up the back of the store to a corner for some semblance of privacy. “I can’t,” I whispered loudly. “I can’t explain why, but I

just can't. We can't be." I regretted my harsh tone, but I knew it was necessary. He was better off without me in his life, no matter how dangerous that was. Tears threatened to well in the corners of my eyes but I fought them off, knowing it would demand an explanation I wasn't ready to give.

Jake boxed me into the corner and stared at me as though daring me to hold by my refusal.

Eventually he bowed his head in defeat and stepped back. "All right then, if that's what you want."

"It's not what I want, believe me, but it's the way it has to be. I'm so sorry, Jake." It was getting harder to fight back the tears. I knew it was a losing battle so I had to get him to leave before I lost the fight. "You have to go, Jake. Please, just go." I lowered my head, hiding my face as the tears started to win.

"I'll go. Just look me in the eyes and tell me you don't love me and you don't want to be with me."

He had me trapped. He wouldn't leave if I didn't meet his eyes, but I couldn't look up with the red tears now pouring down my cheeks. The time had come to tell him after all. I took a deep breath, bracing myself for his shocked horror, and raised my head.

I saw shock on his face, and concern, but not the horror I expected.

Jake moved forward and cupped my cheeks, tilting my head as though trying to find the wounds that would explain the blood. "Angie, what the hell?" He wildly searched around and grabbed a shirt from a nearby rack to wipe my face clean. His worried efforts only made the bloody tears flow faster.

"I need to tell you something, Jake. Follow me to the office out back." He held my hand as I led the way. Once inside, I closed the door and directed Jake to the couch. I didn't know how to start. I didn't even know if he'd believe me, but there was no ignoring it now. I had to at least try.

"You're going to find this hard to believe. I mean, I wouldn't either if I didn't *know*, and once you know you can't unknow, you know?" My hands were fluttering in my lap like an injured bird until Jake reached over and covered them with one of his own, warm hands.

“Angie, just tell me.” His calm, gentle smile was one of the reasons I loved him.

Lies ran through my mind and I gave serious thought to blaming it on a medical condition. I’d seen those TV shows about odd phenomena, too. Maybe that would be more believable than the truth. The thought of lying to him even more, however, made me feel ill. A deep breath helped settle my nerves. “I… I’m a vampire,” I whispered. “That’s why I cry blood. And that’s why we can’t be together. It’s too dangerous for you.”

I expected skepticism or for him to laugh in my face. Instead, he just nodded slowly and took in a deep breath. “That is not what I was expecting.” Jake stood up and paced in front of me, running his hands through his hair and occasionally glancing at me before shaking his head. I remained on the couch, unsure of what to say or think. I could only hope I hadn’t just ruined the friendship that meant everything to me.

Eventually, Jake returned to the couch and sat sideways so he could look at me. His unwavering gaze made me feel as though I were some oddity of nature he was trying to figure out.

When he finally spoke, I jumped at the sudden, broken silence. “That would explain a lot, actually. Why you never want to go roller skating by day, or for a picnic lunch, and why whenever we go to dinner you always order your meat blue with no salad.” He paused in thought, looking at me with his head slightly tilted. It made me want to jump him right there on the couch.

“All right, so say you’re a vampire. You’d get cravings and might not always be able to trust yourself around me if you haven’t fed in a while. But I don’t get how that means we could never be together. Surely there would be precautions we could take.”

I bit my lip lightly before looking him straight in the eyes. He was taking it better than I expected, with more curiosity than fear. Curiosity I could handle. “My sisters and I aren’t sisters by birth. We are sisters by blood, meaning we have the same vampire father. Just over a century ago, our Creator he fed on someone with a disease, got a blood-sickness and went insane. He started beating and torturing us

so we ran away. He's been tracking us ever since, trying to get us back, and now he's close.

"I can't let you stick around. We can't have a relationship or he will use you to get me back. Once he has one of us, the rest won't be able to stay away. We are too closely bonded to ignore a sister's pain. I don't want anything to happen to you, Jake. I love you."

Jake pulled me into his lap and wrapped his arms around me. "I love you too. I know you don't want me to get hurt, but I can't just leave you now that I know all this. I want to keep you safe."

"But you aren't strong enough," I cried. "You need time to gain your strength-"

I stopped, knowing I'd already said too much.

"What do you mean time to gain my strength?"

I closed my eyes. It was all or nothing, I knew that, had known it would eventually come to this ever since it happened. "Don't get mad at me, okay?" I took a deep breath, bracing myself. He may have reacted with curiosity to learning I'm a vampire. I doubted he'd react the same when I told him what I'd done to save his life. "Do you remember that car crash a few months back? We were hit by that truck and the car was totaled and we had no injuries?" I waited for him to nod, and proceeded to tell him about the night he should have died. "I'm sorry, Jake. I didn't want to lose you and I hate myself for having turned you into a… a monster."

He stood and started pacing again. "I'm trying to believe this all, but you have to understand how crazy it all sounds. Vampires exist, and not only am I in love with one, but I've been turned into one to save my life?" Disbelief and betrayal made his tone rise.

"Well, I didn't get to complete the seal, so you're only half Made. That's why you can still tolerate sunlight and don't have cravings yet. I was able to start the turning, enough to revive you, but you are still mostly human."

"Mostly?"

"Yes. I didn't finish it, because I was riddled with guilt enough just starting it. I just wanted to keep you alive. I know it is a lot to take in at once. I really didn't want you to find out this way. I was trying to

find a good time."

"The accident was three months ago, Angie. When would it have been a good time?"

I looked down at my hands, my chest constricting and my stomach tying itself in knots. I didn't have an answer for him.

Jake noisily huffed out a sigh and I could imagine him running his hands through his hair again. If he wasn't careful, I was sure he'd end up bald from this conversation.

"I'm sorry that I'm reacting like this, but—"

"No, Jake. There is no need to apologize. You are right, I should have told you sooner. But how do you say 'oh by the way, I'm a vampire, and I partially turned you to save your life'?"

I felt him sit on the couch beside me once more and the warmth of his hand on my clenched ones was comforting.

"You just did, sweetheart. Look, I'm not going to pretend I'm totally okay with it. It will take me a while to come to grips with this new reality, but it doesn't just erase my feelings for you. You should have had faith in those feelings and trusted me." His fingers hooked under my chin and forced me to look at him. "I do love you, Angie. Now let me in. Let me love you."

"I'm sorry."

He cupped my cheek and I leaned into his large hand. "From now on, no more secrets, right?"

I nodded. "Right. But my Creator –"

"Isn't here right now. I want to show you how much I love you. You can get to filling me in on the rest later." I opened my mouth to talk only for him to cover my lips with his own. Instead of words, my mouth was now filled with his tongue brushing against mine. I gave into the kiss and pressed myself against him.

I lost myself in his embrace, in his warmth, and in our passion. We had shared kisses, but nothing like this. This was a lust-filled kiss that would lead to sex if I allowed it, and I wanted to allow it. I had been too afraid of giving myself over to the lust, knowing I would want to feed at the height of ecstasy, knowing it would freak him out. Now he knew what I was and what he was, I didn't have to be afraid.

I threw my leg over both of his so I now straddled his lap. I started to grind my pelvic bone against him, and felt a twitch as his erection grew. I ached for him, needed to have him right then and there. Not only would it satisfy the lust I'd been feeling since first meeting Jake last year, but it would seal the bond as Creator and Created. My fangs throbbed, eager to taste his blood again, hot against my tongue as I rode him to climax. I couldn't fathom just how much I *needed* him in every way.

Before we lost ourselves in our lust, I pulled back. I needed to let him know that it was essential that our bond be sealed if he wanted to be part of this world, and what that meant. It was his last chance to remain at least partly human, last chance to keep a normal life, and this time I would let him make the choice.

"Wait," I panted, fighting my body's desires as he nibbled my neck. The intense pleasure made me groan. "I need to tell you about our bond. It's not complete."

"Feels pretty complete to me," he breathed into my collarbone, scraping his teeth against my hot flesh. I felt the goose bumps racing across my skin at the raspy tone in his voice. "What more do we need than what we have now?"

I bit back a moan. "Quite a bit. It would allow us to know where the other one is, if either of us is in pain, and even lend our strength if need be."

"Sounds intense." He sat back as his mind took in my words. Although my skin missed his mouth, I was glad to see him take it seriously.

"It is. You'll be trading all that you know as a mortal for a whole new life, if you choose to seal our bond. There won't be much human food you can eat without feeling ill. We're really limited to meat that is barely cooked. Anything else and it doesn't agree with our system. Alcohol is fine. We just burn it up quicker so if you feel you need to get drunk, it will take a lot more than it does now. Believe me. I tried drinking myself into a stupor once. It was an expensive lesson learned, and the hang over is a hundred times worse. Whatever problem you have is not worth the trouble afterward."

“What about chocolate?” Jake’s eyes twinkled with humor, although he remained straight-faced.

I indulged his mischief. “It would be a hell of an immortal life without chocolate, don’t you think? We are limited to the vegan chocolate, the all-natural, no chemicals stuff, though. The way it was originally made. It may be more expensive, but who cares!”

Jake’s eyes suddenly widened. “Well then I’m glad I never bought you a regular box of chocolates for Valentine’s Day.”

I elbowed him in the ribs at his teasing. “It’s not just your diet that will change, you know. Daytime activities are limited to indoor activities, or at least areas that are well covered. Direct UV rays will burn you faster than a magnifying glass over an ant hill.”

“Back on the food,” he interrupted, “is garlic really a threat?”

I snorted. “Don’t believe everything you see on TV. While it makes most vampires sneeze, that’s more from its intense scent. Our sense of smell is heightened to roughly the same strength of a dog’s. But garlic doesn’t do actual harm. It’s more an irritant.

“Holy water and crosses are ineffective as well. We’re not souls damned by Satan. We’re just immortal blood drinkers.”

“Well, it’s all sounding a lot less glamorous now.”

I continued, ignoring his joking. I knew it was more a coping mechanism for him. “To complete the bond, we’ll need to share blood once more, only this time you will also take some of mine.”

Natural instinct curled his nose at the mention of drinking blood and I bit back a chuckle at the memory of my first taste. It took longer to get used to the taste than all those movies and books made you think. The human need to keep blood in the body didn’t just fade instantly. The creature’s need to feed had a hard battle to win.

“Not only that, but it is better when the blood is at its hottest.”

With a wicked smirk, Jake leaned in close and nibbled my earlobe. “And when might that be?” His hot breath on my skin sent tingles down my spine and I allowed the moan to finally escape my lips.

“Do I really need to spell it out for you?” I joked, my voice husky from passion.

A sudden pressure against my mind had me pulling back, gasping. I

hadn't felt a pressure like that for a hundred years or so, and wasn't expecting to feel it again. I shook off the remaining pressure, telling myself I was imagining things. Jake was my first Created, so I figured it was just nerves.

Jake slid his hands down my back to grab my ass cheeks, then my hips to grind me against him again. His mouth began to explore my neck with soft kisses and gentle nibbles. Giving into Jake was so easy. His hands were roaming extensions he sent to thrill me, while his mouth left hot kisses over my skin. His cock twitched and throbbed against my panties, teasing me almost beyond what I could bear. Throwing my head back, I gave silent permission for Jake to take my throat; I surrendered. When he started licking and nibbling I growled like a wild beast, allowing the creature within to stir.

Jake moved his hand under my skirt and gently brushed against my throbbing sex. I raised myself to give him better access and he wasted no time pulling my underwear to the side and dipping his fingers into my hot love tunnel before thrusting in, knuckle deep. I cried out as his fingers flicked against the sweet spot while his teeth scraped against my throat.

I swept my hair out of the way and leaned in close.

"Wait until we climax," I instructed. "You have first taste at the peak, I will wait." I looked into his eyes as the gold took over once more.

Reaching down between us, I unzipped his jeans, grateful he wore no belt today. A few quick pumps and he got the message. He withdrew his fingers, giving me space to line up his tip with my entrance. I leaned back so I could look him in the eyes. Pleasurable warmth flowed through me as I noticed his eyes had turned hard yellow from their natural dark green, his inner creature awake as well. Not only were his eyes different but as he grinned, I noticed his canine teeth had changed. Upon awakening the vampire slumbering within him, his fangs had come in, elongated and sharp. Seeing those changes provoked a whole new excitement within me.

With one sharp movement, I dropped on to him, impaling myself on his throbbing cock. We both moaned as I started to sway, rubbing

my sensitive clit against the button of his jeans. I was in total rapture as Jake let me take control. As slow as I moved, I knew that neither of us would need a long time to climax.

The intensity of the moment hit me as tingling in my toes soon made its way up toward my center. I had been a vampire for close to three hundred years, and this was the first time I had dared Create another with which I could bond. And even this was only out of necessity. I would have preferred to allow him to live a natural life and have a family, but Fate took circumstances unto herself.

My thoughts were soon thrown into oblivion as the first wave of ecstasy crashed and I shouted at Jake, "Now! Take my blood now!"

The pain of his fangs sinking into my throat soon caused another wave to render me senseless. I felt him moan against my skin, the vibrations tickling. As a third wave crested, he pulled back and I watched a drop of blood trickle from the corner of his engorged lips. I continued to ride his cock. I didn't have to wait long for another wave of bliss, and I plunged my own fangs into his neck, offered freely. I felt his back arch as the pain caused immense pleasure within him. Still swaying and moving my hips, I made the climax last as long as I could. His blood, a heady tang already, was sweeter from his orgasm and I knew I could easily become addicted.

A sudden, searing burst of pain in my mind tore me away from him. I knew this couldn't be part of the bond. Something evil had wrenched me from the moment of rapture.

Hello, Evangeline. The voice rang inside my head, a voice I had come to dread. Vitalis was back, and he wasn't going to wait.

I tried to ignore him, but he wouldn't let me.

Did you really think you could escape me forever? I let you and your sisters have your freedom to play, but I'm here to take back what is mine.

His voice made my mind feel greasy, as though his insanity was a contagious disease. *I'm never going back to you, Vitalis. None of us are. You're insane and cruel.*

I was, but I'm cured. I promise you, it's the real me once more. Please, Evangeline. Come back to me. His tone sounded sincere, but he had taught me better than that.

I'm sorry Father, but until you can prove to us that you are cured of your infliction, we will not return. We have lives here and we will fight to keep them.

A growl came across the link before it snapped shut, hurling me back into my now limp body. I found myself lying on the floor by the couch as Jake directed my sisters into the office where they all crouched over me. I gasped air into my lungs, taking it in big gulps as I sat up, startling the people I loved.

Before they could ask how I was, I spoke the three words I knew would frighten my sisters. "Vitalis is back."

The three women looked at each other in fear while Jake helped me back to the couch. Sarah, the oldest, sat beside me.

"Are you sure?" she asked.

"Positive," and I proceeded to tell my sisters what had happened.

"I wonder how he managed to mind link with you when we'd done everything we could to make sure he couldn't," Mary pondered, her arms crossed. She was the second of us Vitalis had turned and was more learned in Vampire Lore.

I glanced at Jake, then to my hands knotted together in my lap. Jake must have cleaned us both of the blood before fetching my sisters as there was little sign of what happened.

"It was my fault," I admitted. "You all remember that car crash Jake and I were in? Well he was more injured than I told you. He was dying and the only way I could save him…" I shrugged sheepishly.

"You turned him?" Sarah asked, eyes wide with shock. I nodded contritely.

"He was dying, Sarah. I couldn't let that happen. I-" Pausing, I glanced at Jake. "I love him." He laid his hand on my shoulder and squeezed gently. Turning back to my sisters, I rushed, "I didn't want to turn him. I would have preferred that he live a normal life and have a family, but I had to save him."

Sarah and Mary looked at each other in their usual, older sister way, one eyebrow raised as though to say, 'She's your sister, you deal with her.' Alice, however, spoke up.

"You did what you had to." She smiled. The youngest of us, she was

always quiet and deferred to the older women. This time, however, she stood against their disapproval. “It wouldn’t have been fair for him to die. I’m glad you did save him. I’ve seen the way you look at him, and him at you. Fate is just making sure you end up together.”

Mary rolled her eyes and Sarah chuckled. “Always the hopeless romantic, our Alice.” Sarah slung her arm around Alice’s shoulders.

Mary brought them back to the issue at hand. “You were saying how it’s your fault?” A frown and quick shake of Sarah’s head and she spoke again. “Sorry, Angie, I didn’t mean it like that.”

“It’s all right Mary, it was my fault. I hadn’t sealed our bond after turning him. I was naively hoping I wouldn’t have to tell him, that he could just go his own way. Of course when he came here telling me he wanted to spend the rest of our lives together, I had to turn him down. Even without Vitalis sniffing around, it was too dangerous for Jake to stay with me. You know we had feared ever being found by our dark Father, regardless of how long it has been. I hoped to chase him off.” I drew in a deep breath, my heart aching. “He told me if I could tell him I didn’t love him back while looking in his eyes, he would go.”

“You’ve never had trouble lying to a man’s face like that before.”

“Jake is different. I didn’t want him to go. I’ve never had to lie like this before.”

Jake interrupted. “She was crying blood, how was I supposed to react?”

Alice gushed while pragmatic Mary rolled her eyes again. Jake was still confused, so Sarah stepped in to explain.

“Angie isn’t usually the woman to let her emotions get the best of her. You must be somethin’ special,” she winked, teasing.

Jake blushed but puffed out his chest, obviously pleased with himself.

“So you were crying blood, then what? If we’re going to figure out how to keep Vitalis out of our heads, we need to know everything.” Mary crossed her arms again, a stern look on her face.

“I brought him back here to explain everything and... well…” I looked away, not quite wanting to tell my sisters too many details.

Jake saved me from having to say more. “We’re adults, what do

you think happened?" Alice giggled while Sarah grinned and Mary just nodded. "Before we got too… busy, Angie paused and told me about having to seal the bond."

Mary gasped.

"That's how he did it! Because he created us, he always has a sense about what we're doing, especially when our emotions are running high. I bet it was while you were tasting his blood for the second time he made the link."

I nodded, not wanting to interrupt her.

"Although we have fed during climax many times, it hasn't been enough, there was never enough emotion. But when you sealed that bond, it allowed him to tap the power and use it to link with you."

"Well then he can't do it again, right? I mean the bond is solidified, so there won't be that rush of power again?" I dared to hope.

Alice and Sarah looked to Mary while Jake sat behind me, pulling me against his chest. He rested his chin on my head, his warm, hard chest behind me, a comforting strength.

"I'm not entirely sure," she murmured, biting her lip in thought. "He might have been able to tap enough power that the bond isn't quite finished, especially if you weren't able to finish of your own will. I think you'd have to try again to make sure, which could open you up to another interruption."

"Surely the old books would say something about that?" Sarah asked.

"I'll have to check on that," Mary replied. "I'll go do that now, you ladies should get back to the store."

"Right, James can't keep the whole store running by himself. You go help him out, Alice, I'll be right behind you." Sarah arched a brow, turning toward me. "Now, are you sure you're all right?"

I nodded. "I'm fine, Sarah. Go look after the store. I just need to calm down a bit more."

"All right, but don't try to finish that bond until Mary has looked into it. Sex is fine, just no biting!" Her lips twitched at the corners as she fought a smirk, but her eyes danced in humor as she tried to diffuse the tension.

“Get out of here, Sarah.”

“Okay Angie, just take care. We’ve worked too hard to settle here to let Vitalis come back and ruin it.”

Once my sisters left the room I sighed and leaned further against Jake’s strong chest. “Well that was an interesting introduction to your new life.” I nervously chuckled.

“It’ll be more exciting, that’s for sure.” He put one arm around me and ran the fingers from his other hand through my hair, sending tingles down my spine. “But as long as it means I can be with you, I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

I felt his heart beat against my back and its steady rhythm soon lulled me into a deep sleep.

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CHAPTER TWO

A few hours later, I was shaken awake by Mary. “Wake up, Angie. Wake up!”

I sat up and rubbed my eyes, realizing Jake had fallen asleep with me lying against him. Standing up carefully so as to not wake him, I followed Mary into the other office where she’d been looking into Vampire Lore.

“Where are the others?”

“Sarah and Alice are still out front. I only just came across this and woke you straight away.” Leaning over the old tome on the desk, Mary ran her finger down the page until she found the spot that was causing such excitement.

“Here it is. There is a record of a vampire from about a millennia ago. She ran away from her Creator who was also inflicted, and after a while dared to Make her new lover. While sealing the bond, the Creator made the mind link and the same thing happened. The seal wasn’t quite solid, but when they tried again the Creator was unable to tap the power again as there wasn’t enough power left to tap.” Mary looked up from the book. “You and Jake can finish sealing the bond and Vitalis shouldn’t be able to touch you. Then Jake will be safer as well.”

I nodded. I let a few moments of silence pass before asking what was starting to bother me. “Do you remember how long it took us to get our full vampire strength?”

Mary shook her head. “I can’t remember very well. Sarah took a while since she was his first. I think I remember her telling me it took her about five years. I took about three. You didn’t take long at all, maybe six months. Alice took a while longer, though. I think it is more about the strength of the Created as well as the confidence and power of the Creator. He was very confident by the time he turned you, plus you were a very strong young woman.”

Minutes passed quietly. “He was a good father.”

“Mmhmm,” Mary agreed softly.

“I miss him. The old him.”

“So do we, Angie. We all miss the father he was.”

A soft knock at the door startled me and I turned, relieved to see Jake’s figure in the doorway. “I woke up and you were gone.”

I walked over to him and held him close. “I’m sorry, Jake. Mary woke me with some great news.” I stood back to look at him. “We can attempt to finish the bond and Vitalis shouldn’t be able to tap it, then you’ll be safe. I can hide you from him with my power until you gain full strength.”

“Hide me?”

“This is an all or nothing situation, Jake. If we hadn’t attempted to form the bond at all, you would still be invisible to him but because it’s partially complete, he can still attempt to track you. Now that we know it’s safe, we need to complete it so he can’t get to you.”

A sly look came over his face. “Is that so?” His wicked grin of lust made me blush.

“Go on, don’t let me stop you,” Mary sighed. She never was one to be interested in another’s affections.

“Thanks, Mary.” I giggled as Jake dragged me back to the other office. As soon as the door was closed, Jake was covering me in kisses and pinning me to the wall. “You really don’t want to waste any time, do you?”

“What’s the point?” Jake whispered between kisses. I stretched my neck and allowed him to kiss and nibble as my arousal grew once more. “This time, no soft and slow,” he growled. “This time, I am in control.” His eyes glowed bright yellow and I whimpered with desire.

He lifted me so our hips were at the same height, and I happily wrapped my legs around him. Jake reached to his pants and unzipped them, slipping the button through its hole and letting his jeans drop around his ankles. Taking my mouth in a hard kiss, he tickled my clit through my panties and I was soon moaning in my throat. With his spare hand, he held my wrists together above my head and I was helpless while he continued to tease me.

I threw my head back, breaking the kiss and he took his chance, simultaneously thrusting deep inside me while he sank his fangs into my throat. My eyes flew open and a cry froze in my throat as my body shuddered with pleasure and pain. Jake continued thrusting, now at a more gentle pace. The hand not pinning my wrists to the wall was now sliding under my shirt. He moved my bra to the side to play with my breasts, roughly tweaking and pulling at my hard nipples as I cried out and squirmed to his touch.

"I've never seen this side of you, Jake," I panted, unsure of this man.

When he looked in my eyes, I swallowed hard. He had given in completely to the creature within. The hard yellow of his irises had no hint of green, and I knew that his humanity had been pushed right down, almost extinguished by blood lust. If I'd been standing, my legs would have given out from under me. The dark creature within me purred in response. That was the catch of being a vampire. Sure, there were the perks of immense strength and immortality, which sometimes seemed like a curse, but a vampire spent their entire existence fighting the creature that was responsible for those gifts. It was a creature full of lust with a constant thirst for blood, raging for control of its host body. I'd been a vampire long enough to have a decent handle on my inner beast, but even I couldn't let my guard down. And now I needed to show Jake that he couldn't give in.

I lengthened the leash on the dark creature within, allowing it to surface long enough for him to notice before pulling it back. "Don't give over to it completely, Jake. Not this time. We need to stay focused."

I stared the creature down until streaks of green shot through the molten gold. "Sorry, Angie. It came up so quickly I got lost."

Pulling him in closer with my legs, I whispered, "It's ok. We all do the first time the creature stirs." I leaned forward and kissed him, breaking away long enough to bite his lip before diving back into a passionate kiss. I felt his cock twitch and harden again inside me, and he took a slower pace.

This time took longer, but I savored every thrust, every nipple

tweak, and every last tingle as it traveled up my legs from my toes. As it become too intense to speak, I slapped Jake on the back, warning him I was about to bite. He stretched his neck to the side, giving me permission and room to finish what had been interrupted. Just as the first climax crested, my fangs pierced his flesh and hot blood rushed into my mouth. Jake climaxed beneath me, his back arching and his mouth open in a silent roar. I watched him shudder as I drank his blood. As another climax raced through me I leaned back, licking his wound clean so it would heal.

Once done, I leaned back further to look at him, his eyes liquid gold with threads of darkest green. I took in his ruggedly handsome face framed by long black hair and dark stubble. His high cheekbones and strong jaw were chiseled and almost perfect. I felt like I could stare at him for hours.

Jake sat back and smiled awkwardly. “What, do I have something in my teeth?” He licked his fangs, still elongated from passion, causing me to giggle.

“I’m just admiring my handiwork is all. You suit the vampire life.” A somber mood came over me and I glanced down. “I’m still sorry that I turned you and didn’t say anything. I should have. You probably would have been in even more danger, more vulnerable.”

He hooked his finger under my chin and forced me to look at him. “Most people probably would be upset or pissed off but if this means we can be together…” Leaning in, he kissed me softly on the lips. “I couldn’t care less what you turn me into, as long as I am yours.”

I smiled gently, so happy to finally be able to have the man I loved. The moment was short lived however, as searing pain once again ripped me away from him.

Evangeline, the time is up. I need you and your sisters back now. Don’t toy with me, you belong by my side. Stop playing and come home.

Vitalis, give it up. You’ll have to kill us before we come back to you. You aren’t doing anything to prove you are cured, so until you do that, fuck off. We are home.

I pulled away from his mental hold, grateful to realize Jake had figured out what was happening and was holding me tight.

“What did the dirt bag say this time?” His eyes were still gold, now from anger instead of passion.

“He’s coming for us. Now. We need to get my sisters.”

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CHAPTER THREE

I pulled Jake along behind me as we raced into the other office. “Mary! Mary?” Panic momentarily gripped my heart before logic could take over. “She’s probably gone out front again. Come on, we have to warn the girls.” I didn’t get far before Jake grabbed me and reluctantly pointed out what I hadn’t noticed. Sarah was the messy one, yet the desk, which was Mary’s primary domain, was riddled with crumpled paper. The ancient tome listing Vampire Lore was sitting in the middle of it all, pages torn out.

A piece of paper with red on it caught my eye and my heart stopped. Gently picking it up, I noticed there was writing on it. I unraveled it to read the scrawled message.

> *I told you the time was up, Evangeline. You and your sisters will come home, even if I must hurt you to see it happen. Mary is with me. Sarah and Alice are next. Then, I’m coming for you.*

The words chilled me.

“It’s written in blood. Mary’s blood.” My heart pounded. “Mary is strong, but I’m worried about her. He won’t kill her, he needs her alive to bring me and the girls in, but that doesn’t mean he won’t hurt her. In his own insanity he still loves us. There is still part of him there, it’s just buried under layers of blood sickness, and that makes him capable of anything.” I looked up at Jake. “We have to check on Sarah and Alice. Sarah can take care of herself, but Alice is still naïve in her own way, and vulnerable.”

He nodded agreement. “Let’s go.” I followed him out of the office and down the corridor that led to the store front. Relief flooded my body as I saw the girls cheerfully talking to customers while James,

our sales assistant, kept shooting longing gazes at Alice.

I shook my head. “That boy has no idea who he is in love with.”

Jake followed my line of sight and chuckled. “Neither did I until earlier today. Trust Alice to do what’s right, she’s a good kid.”

Raising my eyebrow, I smirked. “Good, yes, but hardly a kid anymore. Although she does still act like one at times.” Sighing, I looked over to my younger sister. “Vitalis took her too young. She was still a teen and not mature enough to deal with immortality. He did it to save her life, he said, but I wonder if he wasn’t already ill.”

“Nothing you can do about it now. She’s your sister and she’s in danger. We need to warn her and Sarah.”

I bobbed my head and walked casually over to Sarah. She noticed me walking over to her and directed the customer to the checkout. I must have looked upset, as she greeted me with a worried tone.

“Are you ok, honey?”

I watched her eyes dart between Jake and me a few times before answering. “Mary is gone. Vitalis took her.” Before Sarah could draw attention, I pulled her to a quiet corner as Jake walked over to get Alice. “We had just finalized the bond when Vitalis grabbed me again. He told me time was up and he would bring us home. After I wrenched myself away from his hold, I went searching for Mary. The office was a mess and there was a note written in her blood.” I thrust the note at her, barely waiting for her to finish reading before bursting out, “We need to get her back.”

Sarah stood before me, pale from shock. It took her a few moments to grasp the implications, but by the time Jake had brought Alice over, she had regained her composure. “Do you have a plan?”

I bit my lip. “Not really, but surely he has left a clue to where he has taken Mary.” I watched Alice, waiting for her gasp of horror, but her nod of understanding told me that Jake had already filled her in.

“Well then, I suggest you and Jake go back to the office and search.” Sarah was taking charge and I was relieved. “Alice, go tell James there’s been a family emergency and the store will have to close while I bring the racks in and close up. Make sure he goes home, too. I don’t want an innocent’s blood being spilled.” Alice rushed over

to the counter, and as she spoke over the store microphone, Sarah strode over to the racks just outside the store. Jake and I marched to the back offices, nudging our way through customers making their way out of the store.

Once in Mary's office, we rifled through the paper mess, trying to find a clue.

"Here," Jake called out, directing my attention to the back of the door. "I'd just closed it to make sure no one walks in and I saw it."

Vitalis had nailed a map to the door and, in Mary's blood, circled the cemetery.

"How original," Jake snorted with derision.

Sarah spoke behind us, giving us a fright. "He's old school, traditional. That will make him predictable and will hopefully play to our advantage." She turned to me and grasped my shoulders. "We're going to get her back, Angie, and we're going to end this once and for all." I could tell she was saying it more for her own assurance rather than mine. I was strangely calm about the whole situation. I knew it was him or us and, given the choice, I would choose to take him down without a second thought.

"I know, Sarah. We need to do this."

Alice walked in, almost bumping us with the door. "Sorry."

"Never mind that, we know where Vitalis is." Sarah pointed to the map and Alice paled at the blood of our sister. Sarah marched to the computer and I followed. I watched her open up Google Maps and type in the cemetery name in the search box. Zooming in, we scanned the cemetery for the most likely spot to find our Creator.

"There," I pointed, and Sarah stopped browsing. "The mausoleum, that's where he'll be. It's right up the back so he can get away and lose us easily if needed, and plenty of places to set traps. But if we go over the wall right behind it, we can ambush him." I glanced at Jake and Sarah, pleased to see them dip their heads in approval.

"We can arm ourselves and head out tonight," Jake declared, standing straight with his arms crossed.

Sarah and I looked at each other, while Alice responded. "Arm ourselves? With what?"

“You don’t have any weapons?” We shook our heads. “Well then luckily for you I collect bladed weapons. Sais, swords, knives. You name it and I probably have it in the basement.” He glanced at his watch. “It’s only three p.m., I can give you all a brief rundown on what weapon would be best suited to you and how to use it. “ I noticed the same look of skepticism on my sisters’ faces as I’m sure my own showed.

“Should I ask why you have them?” I asked warily.

Jake shrugged. “I’m a gaming nerd, you know that. I’ve learned about weapons from my games. But I have a special fondness for the intimacy offered by sword fighting, something gun play doesn’t have. People get freaked out when I say I have a basement full of sharp weapons, so I don’t tell many people. We need the weapons, so I’m telling you now. Any more questions?”

I exchanged glances with my sisters then shook my head. “Lead the way.”

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CHAPTER FOUR

A few hours later, we all piled into Jake's SUV, our weapons in a knap sack in the trunk. Sarah mumbled encouraging words to Alice in the backseat while Jake grasped my hand in the passenger seat. I was relieved his car was an automatic. I needed to keep physical contact with him to stay calm.

He had run us through movement drills to get an idea what weapons would suit us. For Alice, who had shown surprising strength and determination, he picked a rapier, light and agile, but with a mean point. I understood why The Musketeers would have had such weapons. Alice's eyes had hardened as I watched her thrust and swish the rapier around. She was calm but distant. Darkness seemed to have descended on her, casting a shadow across her normally bright demeanor. My sister had changed.

Sarah was now sporting a set of throwing daggers, belted around her slim waist. She was still squeamish about violent confrontation so Jake figured with the daggers, she could at least give Mary some weapons as well, without weighing Sarah down too much.

I was instantly drawn to the sai. After all the beatings dealt out after Vitalis went insane, I wanted to exact my revenge so close to him that he could count each golden speck in my eyes. I had hope that, in his last moments, he might be free of his illness and I wanted him to know exactly who had released him from his cursed life.

Jake had armed himself with a traditional long sword. He had said if Vitalis was going to be old school, then he would get an old school death. The real Vitalis, our Creator, deserved the respect.

The drive to the cemetery seemed to last forever, yet was over all too soon. Jake parked down the street so we could approach quietly on foot. Tapping into our Vampire strength, we vaulted the eight foot concrete wall and landed silently on the other side. There was no hint to the untrained eye that someone had passed by, let alone someone

held captive in the mausoleum, but we knew otherwise. We could smell Mary's blood, which worried us. She should have healed quickly, unless he had given her a drug that stopped her healing.

We quickly approached the front of the crypt. Jake glanced around the corner then waved us forward. I held Alice back from charging in. Something had changed in her since hearing about Mary's capture. She wasn't the sweet young girl I called my sister. She was a cold, unapproachable woman whose eyes were now glowing gold. Her Vampire had taken control.

Jake nodded at me, the sign to slowly open the door. Musty air whooshed out and I fought the urge to cough.

The crypt was silent. I squeezed in, since the door wouldn't open more than a foot wide. Moving a few steps in, I gave enough room for the others to join me without wandering too far ahead. It took a few moments for my sight to adjust to the deep darkness within, but I was thankful I could see in the dark. Glancing back at my sisters and Jake, I motioned to the center of the floor, directing their attention to the stairway leading down into the ground. Jake made a "v" with his index and middle finger, pointing at his own eyes then at me, showing he'd be watching out.

I started down the stairs in point, leaving my sisters to follow and Jake to bring up the rear. My steps fell on the stone with no sound. The stairway seemed to go on forever, and it was a few minutes before I saw a flickering light, hinting at the end. I paused and moved to the side, pointing my hand at the light. Jake, Sarah, and Alice all nodded so I continued down, my weapons in my hands. The anticipation of sinking the tip into the cold bastard's heart was almost unbearable, so I was filled with disappointment when I entered the room and couldn't see him.

The disappointment was short lived, however, as I spied Mary, bound and gagged by the wall to the right of the entrance. Signaling to Sarah, I ran over to her while Alice and Jake took watch. We were half way across the space to our sister when Vitalis stepped into the room from a hidden doorway.

"You get Mary, Jake and I will take care of our Creator," Alice spat.

I paused only to glance at the face of our father, seeing his eyebrows lift in his surprise.

“Why Alice, you astonish me with your nerve. You’re normally so quiet and reserved. Whatever has come over my sweet little Alice?” His mocking tone made my rage roar into life, but I fought it back and moved to Mary instead.

I crouched by her with Sarah, untying the gag and ropes.

“You shouldn’t have come,” Mary whispered, her lips fat and cracked.

“What would you have us do, huddle together and ignore your pain? Wait for him to pick us off one by one? No way, sister. With Jake’s help and Alice now tapping into her creature within, we have a chance to end this forever.”

Mary rubbed her wrists while I pulled out a healing salve from my pocket. “What did he do to you? Why aren’t you healing?”

“I’m not sure,” she pleaded, trying to meet my gaze with swollen eyes, black and blue bruises forming around them.

“He injected her with something.” Sarah growled, spying a bloody dot on Mary’s neck. “He must have some sort of inhibiting drug that prevents the healing.”

Mary’s hand reached to the spot Sarah brushed with her own fingers. “I’m sorry,” my older sister sobbed. “I’m so sorry.” Suddenly, she grabbed Sarah’s fingers, twisting until I heard a sickening crunch as the small bones broke. I noticed her other hand reach down beside her. As she brought a syringe full of liquid the color of dirty dish water toward Sarah’s exposed wrist, I yanked my other sister backward on top of me. Mary lurched toward us, but Sarah planted her foot in our sister’s face.

“What the hell did you do to her, Vitalis!” I screamed in his direction as Sarah rolled off of me.

His responding laugh made me want to plunge a blade in his eye. I was filled with a blood lust unknown to me. While Alice and Jake lunged at him with their swords, he panted a reply.

“I made her like me, of course. She has my sense of clarity, something you girls lack. I tried to give you that gift all those years

ago, but the beatings were insufficient and took too long. Since your escape I've been trying to find a better way to gift you girls, and now that I have perfected it, I've returned." Another burst of harsh laughter rushed from his mouth, but it was cut short by Jake's fist, aided by the handle of his sword, thumping Vitalis across the temple. Despite being immortal, the head was still a weak spot for a vampire. Our father slumped to the ground, blood trickling from where Jake hit him.

I glanced at Mary. "Do you think we can save her?"

"If anyone was to know, it would be her," Sarah replied sadly. "She was the one who knew how to translate the old lore."

"So what do we do?" Alice asked. "We can't just leave her, not after we came here for her." She hobbled over to Mary's limp form, still out cold from Sarah's powerful kick. Alice scooped up the syringe and held it to the light. "You know, James is a whiz with chemical things. He's only working at the store to support him through college so he can become a chemist. I know we don't want to involve him, but he might be able to find out what this is and make an antidote. He's way ahead of his class."

Sarah and I glanced at each other. "If we want our sister back, it's worth a shot," I beseeched of her.

She sighed. "All right, we'll give it a go. If," she demanded of Alice, "you think you can trust him with our secret. If he's going to do this, he might as well know everything, to eliminate any awkward questions." Alice nodded solemnly.

"I trust him implicitly."

"All right then, let's grab Mary and head back to the car."

"What about him?" Jake asked, throwing his thumb over his shoulder at Vitalis.

Sarah didn't bother looking. "Burn him before he wakes up."

"I have some gas in the car. I'll get it."

Movement behind Jake caught my attention and I froze. Vitalis was stirring, standing up. Everything seemed to slow right down. As Jake cleaned the blade of his sword and slipped it back in its sheath, our Creator surged to his feet and grabbed his own sword, swinging it high above his head. I screamed and ran forward, shoving Jake out of

the path but not in enough time to escape injury. The sword cut into his leg.

As Jake roared in pain, time resumed normal speed. Vitalis swung his sword high again, aiming the tip at Jake's heart. I leapt forward, sai at the ready, and sunk the tip deep in my father's chest, aimed upwards to pierce his heart. Blood poured over me from the wound and an odd sound gurgled from his mouth. The sword dropped, slicing through my arm as it fell. I gritted my teeth against the pain, pushing the tip of the sai further into Vitalis' chest.

His weight pulled me with him as he dropped to his knees. For the first time in over a hundred years, my Creator, my dark father, looked at me with clear, warm golden brown eyes. Red tears sprung in the corners of his eyes as he brought his hand to my cheek. "Evangeline." He glanced at my sisters with sorrow in his eyes. In death, he was the father we loved once more. Looking into my eyes for the final time, his last words would stay with me forever. "I'm sorry, my daughters. You have made me proud."

His last breath rattled out of his mouth and he collapsed. I stayed on my knees, having let go of my weapon. I panted, fighting back tears. It was over.

Silence filled the room for a few minutes as we remembered the man who had created us, instead of the man who had tortured us. He was still our father, and we would always love him.

A groan brought me back to the present. I turned to Jake who was nursing his leg. I was relieved after a moment to watch the deep wound heal before my eyes. Glancing at my arm, there was little left of the slice in the flesh. Alice had blood on her, but nothing was left of her wounds. Sarah had escaped all injury, while Mary still lay unconscious, bruised and bloody.

"We have to hurry and get her help," Sarah stated, her eyes glazed in shock.

Nodding, I reached down to help Jake stand. I watched Alice lightly shake Sarah before they picked Mary up in between them. Jake laid his arm around my shoulder and we slowly walked up the stairs, relieved it was still pre-dawn outside. By the time we exited the

mausoleum, Jake could walk unaided again. Reaching the wall, he took Mary's form from Sarah and Alice, putting her over his shoulder so the other girls could jump over the wall.

I let Jake go next as I turned and looked at the crypt that would now be the final resting place of Vitalis, our dark father. One last, bloody red tear trickled down my cheek for the man who had been such a large part of my life, for better and for worse.

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CHAPTER FIVE

By the time I was over the wall and caught up to the others in the car, they were all in and waiting. We drove in near silence, the only words being Alice's directions to James' place. She directed us around back so the neighbors wouldn't spot us as easily, and we snuck up to the back door. Alice pulled a necklace out from under her shirt. She had a key to James' place around her neck.

Unlocking the door and letting us inside, she waved at us to stay in the kitchen while she went into his bedroom to wake him. She was gone for quite some time. I assumed she had explained everything to the poor man due to the stunned look on his face when they finally entered.

Too numb from my loss, all I could do was greet him with a nod. Alice handed James the syringe. He looked at it under the kitchen light before briskly walking into another room. He returned moments later with a small microscope, some petri dishes and slides, test tubes, and other funny looking things I assumed chemists used. He injected some of the contents from the syringe into a petri dish and slid it under the microscope, adjusting the magnification.

Sitting back from the eyepiece, he pulled out some chemicals, mixed them in the test tubes with the dirty liquid and then had a look at the results under the microscope again. I soon lost interest in his methods and turned my attention to my ailing sister. Her skin was grey and cold like a corpse and her breath rattled, each one weaker than the last. She was running out of time.

Just as I was about to demand James hurry, he rushed over to Mary with another syringe, this one filled with a clear liquid. Before any of us could protest, ask him if he was certain, he plunged the thin needle into her neck at the same site as the initial injection. Immediately, Mary sat up and gasped in air, her skin slowly returning to a normal color.

“What the hell did you just give her?” Sarah demanded.

“An artificial adrenalin that I’ve been working on. Much like epinephrine, but without having to be injected into the heart.”

“Whatever the hell it is, I like it,” Mary quipped. We all looked at her as though she were a stranger. “What? I went insane and almost died. I’m allowed to joke.”

Shock finally hit my system and my legs gave out. Jake caught me before I hit the floor.

“It’s all right,” he assured me. “It’s all over.”

“I’m so tired,” I breathed.

“I know you are. You should rest. We’ll all be here when you wake up.” He cupped my cheek. “You did good out there, sweetheart. Now it’s time to take it easy.” Jake kissed me on the forehead. “I’m yours forever, now sleep.”

Within moments, the blissful darkness swamped me, and I slept.

***

I woke up a few hours later, dawn long gone and the sun taking hold. Not recognizing the bed I was in, momentary panic threatened to swamp me, but as though he knew I was now awake, Jake walked through the door.

“Good morning, sleepy. You’ve been out for quite some time. Last night really wore you out.”

“Where are my sisters?”

“They’re in the kitchen.” He sat on the bed beside me and held my hands. The look of gentle concern conflicted with the dancing excitement in his eyes and was too confusing for me to begin to comprehend. “Something fantastic happened while you were asleep. James started playing with his chemistry set, studying blood from each of us and stumbled across something interesting.” His wide smile and dancing eyes were giving me a headache, it was too early still for anything except more sleep.

When he didn’t continue straight away, I sighed and gave in since it was obvious he wanted me to ask. “All right, what did James find?”

“There’s a cure. You don’t have to be a vampire anymore, none of us do. I don’t know exactly how he did it, but there’s something in the blood that can be healed. Like a virus.” He gripped my hands harder until it was painful. “We can become mortal again, have a normal life.”

I sat in silence, unsure what to say. When I was first turned, I often dreamt of being human again, but after a while I got used to and even enjoyed being a vampire. We never killed unnecessarily, just took what we needed and left those we fed upon safe and sexually sated. Once Vitalis went mad and the beatings began, the dreams of being human returned, only to flee once again after our escape. We had adapted to human life quite successfully and I no longer cared about not being one of them.

But now, here was the chance I had dreamed of all those years ago. I could have a real life, settle down and have children of my own flesh with Jake, if he was willing. That idea was appealing so I sat up properly to ask Jake what he wanted.

A stabbing pain across my abdomen made me stop moving. I gingerly lifted my shirt, afraid of what I would find. I should have healed. There was nothing that could explain the pain. What I found shocked me to the core.

Vitalis had always hinted at Vampire Lore and the Great Covenant. It was what protected Vampires from becoming mindless beasts, only interested in the next feed. All that was left was the brand on selected Vampires. When they were destroyed, the brand would transfer to the one who was the chosen successor. Most never got the chance to choose a successor, he had told us, before being killed by overzealous vampire hunters. He and two others had been lucky to hide all those years, keeping the Great Covenant, and in turn all vampires safe from becoming the monsters humans feared.

He had shown us the seal branded on his abdomen and now, that very same design stared back at me from my own body.

“All those years, he never told me.” I ran my fingers over the raised skin.

“Told you what? What is that?” Jake asked.

I looked at him, tears in my eyes. To this day I still don't know whether they were tears of joy or sadness. "I can never take the cure. The day the Covenant fails is the day a monster is unleashed on the world." It was my turn to hold his hands. "I'm so sorry Jake. I thought, when you told me of the cure, we could finally have the life I always wanted you to have. But now in his death, Vitalis has entrusted me with a noble calling. I am now one of the few things keeping vampires from becoming uncontrollable beasts."

He nodded. "Then I will stay with you. Your sisters want to take the cure. Alice wants a life with James, Sarah and Mary want to walk in the sun again. You were the last one. If you stay a vampire, so will I. I'm not leaving you without a guard." I opened my mouth to protest, but he interrupted me. "No, Angie. I'm yours forever. I meant it when I first said it and I still mean it now. We'll keep the monsters of the night away. Together."

His cheesy grin had me in a fit of giggles. "All right then," I finally agreed. "We'll do it together." I wove my fingers through his, entwined as our destinies now were. Forever.

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Phoenix Johnson has always been intrigued by the written word. Even when she was a young girl, she usually had her nose stuck in at least one book, and her need to read would drive her to peruse the back of the same cereal box each morning at breakfast. Paranormal and fantasy captured her heart, with tales about dragons, magic, and fanciful creatures sweeping her away to a wonderful new world where she felt she truly belonged. While she dabbled in writing while in primary school, it wasn't until high school that she decided she should try her hand at writing her own book, and even gave poetry a try.

She is extremely excited to see where her writing career takes her next and couldn't be happier, even through all the hard work, blood, sweat and tears.

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Sanguine Shadows: A Curse Workers Novella by Erzabet Bishop

Ball gowns and bite marks…

Mari Di Bartolo was a witch coming back to her roots in Salem. Juggling work and school, she is a woman on a mission until she is attacked one night after work and left for dead. When Mari is about to step through the veil, she is given a choice-become a vampire or fade away. She chooses life. Nevertheless, it's not her new Sire that holds Mari's attention, but the strange and enigmatic Fae with the golden green eyes. Full of mischief and mayhem, the night of the Vampire Ball is upon her and all that glitters may just be her teeth in the moonlight.

Darkness lurks in the shadows…

Fenris is the Captain of the Guard for the Queen of the Dark Court. For centuries he's secured the barrier between the human world and Faery, part of a Protectorate that keeps humans blissfully ignorant of the beings hidden in their midst. But when another rogue wolf attack brings him to a crime scene, he remembers another girl with long dark hair and eyes that spoke to his soul. On a night filled with wild magic, there will be blood and some of it might just be given willingly.

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Sanguine Shadows: A Curse Workers Novella By Erzabet Bishop

CHAPTER ONE

“You have to marry, Mari Di Bartolo. It is our way. Our Houses must be strengthened by those of noble blood. You are my child and, as such, will marry accordingly.” Roark, her Sire gave her a stern look and left her standing in the middle of her room, a stinging retort on her lips.

She wanted to laugh at his resemblance to the Gary Oldman version of Dracula, complete with long hair, old fashioned clothes and glasses perched on his nose, but she didn’t dare. Especially when she took in the dress she was about to wiggle into.

“You’re not getting out of it, so don’t try.” Gibbs, her resident ghost, lounged against the four poster bed, his gaze locked on the dress draped over the edge of the mattress.

“Ugh. Can’t you even leave me alone so I can change?” She reached for the top of her robe and scowled.

“Get over it. You’re not my brand of fruit basket. Come on. You don’t have all night. Wait too long and that battle axe housekeeper is going to come up here and lace you in tighter than…”

“Okay. I don’t need a visual.” Mari shuddered, sliding out of her robe and dropping it on the bed.

“Just trying to help.”

“Well, don’t.”

Mari twisted her lips and winced as the sharp stab of her fangs cut into her lip. The annual vampire version of a meat market was about to take place downstairs in their ballroom. How many times would Roark try to pawn her off on a desiccated old windbag, or one of his weird pervy social rejects, just so he could further his political ambitions?

She wasn't interested.

She had one goal. To find the bastards who put her here, and shove a silver plated blade right between their furry eyeballs. Her gaze traveled down the smooth expanse of her chest and left arm, still marveling at the way her new body healed itself. It was a miracle really, and one she should be grateful for. And she would be, after she'd taken care of business.

So why did her thoughts keep swaying toward one particular Fae Captain of the Guard? Fenris was one of the Protectorate, and the only one other than her Sire who had seen the girl before she'd been changed into a lycanthrope assassin in a skirt. He'd looked in her eyes and, despite what had been done to her… just when she had been determined not to feel, she looked into his eyes and saw their light shining back at her.

He gave her the strength to take what Roark gave her without spinning into madness. A human girl with no knowledge of the supernatural world one moment and the next laying in a pool of her own blood—the corpse of a werewolf lying next to her on the sidewalk—and a vampire offering her a second shot bending down to offer a kiss that would render her immortal.

Mari took it. But all the while wished it was Fenris' teeth sinking into her neck and his blood passing through her lips.

She absently slipped into the dress and sucked in her stomach as Gibbs helped fasten all of her bindings.

"Thank you."

"No problem, Pigeon. Now, help me find Bertrand and we're good. And watch what you do with that arsenal under your dress. You don't want to put someone's eye out with that thing."

"I just want to find Fenris or get out of here so I can do something other than schmooze with the other walking dead."

"Don't diss your fellow vamps, girlie. Roark saved your sorry butt."

"I realize that. But right now salvation feels a lot like being a moth in a jar. I just want some flame to fly up next to."

And a chance to turn into the witch she was here, in Salem, to become.

“What? So you can die again?” Gibbs raised an eyebrow and twisted his features into a frown, crossing his arms in front of his chest.

“No.” But it sounded defensive, even to her own ears. “I just want to find him.”

“He looks for you. Every time he comes here.”

Mari looked at him, incredulous. “And you’re telling me this why?”

“I shouldn’t. You don’t understand the Fae like I do.”

“I know him.”

“No you don’t, Pigeon.” Gibbs shuddered. “You haven’t seen…”

She brushed on some powder and swiped on cranberry red lipstick. “Don’t you dare.”

“I dare a lot of things these days.”

“Well, not now.”

“True enough. We have to get you downstairs before that woman comes up here searching for you.”

She turned and he gave her the once over.

“You’re good.”

“Okay.” She stepped into her shoes and was out the door, making her way toward the stairs.

Every time she saw him here at Essex House for a meeting or some dealings with her Sire, her body flamed, thinking about how tenderly he touched her.

But how could he possibly feel the same having seen her at her lowest point?

Bah. She was better off focusing her energy on staking the hairy fuckers who caused this in the first place.

She’d heard Roark talking with the Protectorate council. A reckless band of rogue wolves were attacking humans and fellow paranormals, and she had to put a stop to it. Nothing else mattered. No one else should have to go through what she did. If it weren’t for Roark and Fenris…

It had to be the same wolves. It just had to.

And she would make it right.

The sting of tears in the corners of her eyes brought Mari up short.

She couldn't afford to be seen with bloody red streaks running down her face. She was the royal heir. No one had ever been turned by her Sire and it had caused quite the stir.

No. No crying. Not now. She had to make an appearance and get out there. With the annual Salem Halloween events happening all around the city, it stood to reason the wolves would find more victims to attack.

Hell, if Roark hadn't turned her, she'd be either long since buried or sprouting fur once a month herself. With a frown, she mentally counted down the endless amount of training sessions she'd undertaken in order to handle herself around the wolves if she ever came across them again.

Did they do it just because they were assholes or did they have something else in mind? Not that it mattered. She was going to skin their sorry asses either way.

There was a reason she let herself be stuffed into a dress with enough voluminous folds to hide an arsenal underneath it; because she was. Strapped to one thigh was a silver tipped knife and the other, her favorite spell casting wand. Not that she needed it anymore, but it was nice having it along for the ride.

Crossing over into death had brought out more than just a set of fangs and lust for lycanthrope blood. It had also given the natural witch inside of her room to blossom and change into something none of the House residents would ever suspect. The ability to talk to the dead. She heard them. In the halls. Everywhere, and it took a good deal of concentration to shut them out. Especially now they discerned she heard them. Like Gibbs. God, the guy never gave her a moment's peace.

As if on cue one of the resident specters drifted by, bobbing her head in greeting. Her skirts trailed behind her along the marble floors and she vanished into a wall.

"Huh."

A mystery for another time.

Mari stared down at the cleavage billowing over the top of the corset style gown and wanted to crawl back up the stairs and bolt the

door. One false move would be all it would take for the little pervert she was supposed to dance with tonight to get an eyeful. She tugged at the top of the dress, gasping as the corset seemed to grow smaller.

Shit. How was that even possible? It was a good thing she didn't need to breathe.

A couple passed her on the landing and she gave a regal nod.

"Good evening, Mari."

"Hi. Thank you for coming." She gave them her brightest smile, a flush creeping up the back of her neck and over her cheeks at being caught wrestling with her dress.

What else could she say?

Excuse me, but my boobs are about to pop out. I'll be right back.

"Sure," Mari muttered under her breath, carefully taking one step at a time until she reached the bottom of the staircase. "That wouldn't be any more awkward. Not at all."

"Talking to yourself again, Pigeon?" Gibbs' spectral form leaned against the bottom banister, his eyebrow raised and a sardonic grin plastered on his face. The twenty something ghost stood straight up and gave her a mock salute. His Bauhaus tee shirt and skinny jeans matched his nineties style hairstyle, his lanky form and pasty white complexion giving him a Goth appearance completely suitable for his snarky disposition.

Despite that, she was glad to see him.

"Shut up."

He cupped his hand to his ear in mock deafness and leaned forward. "What's that, love? I didn't hear you."

She started to retort, then smiled as another couple paraded down the hallway.

God, she hated dog and pony shows.

Her dress was too tight. Mari realized it tonight when she tried it on in her room but, after avoiding the subject of the Vampire Ball for weeks, she didn't have time to do anything about it.

Nell, the housekeeper had placed it in her closet with a tart but knowing glance. "Make sure you try that on so I can make alterations." Her hawk like expression never failed to quail Mari's

already frayed nerves and she'd just as soon not deal with the woman.

Mari forgot. The endless meet and greets and rotations around Salem made sticking around the house for a dress fitting nearly impossible. She was a simple girl that went to school, practiced her spells and worked in a bar before this happened. Now she had to be all Princess Morticia. It never failed to make her laugh.

"You're about to fall out of that thing." Gibbs narrowed his eyes. "Can you bend over? I want to test the laws of gravity."

Mari snorted and rolled her eyes. "You're horrible."

"I know. But you love me." He grinned, his gaze traveling toward the ball room where more guests had started to congregate.

"Is he here?"

"No." Gibbs sighed. "What about your boy wonder?"

"Um. I don't…" Mari walked ahead, trying to pretend she didn't hear him. It was bad enough she thought about the Fae lord at all. She saw him during meetings and occasionally around town and every time he winked at her.

"Don't play coy with me. You like him."

She stopped short and pressed back against a wall. "What if I do," she hissed. "It's not like he sees me as anything more than some poor kid his friend changed into a vamp to save her pathetic life."

Gibbs gave her the stink-eye. "You're stupid. You know that? The man stares at you like a dog with a bone."

The visual didn't help and she winced.

"Oops. Sorry."

"Yeah. A few seconds later and I'd be right there with you hanging out in ghost land."

"But you aren't." Gibbs sighed and lowered his eyes. "I wish someone had found me before…"

"I know."

He'd been killed by the same rogue wolves and was just as eager to see them caught. His lover, Bertrand, was in the next room. He'd been trying to connect with him for months and Mari had agreed to try and reunite them tonight.

Before her new life, she'd been a student, ignorant of anything

except her work, a stack of spell books she thought were a nice diversion, and her school-work-school schedule. Nothing was serious.

Until it was.

One night, after her shift at The Copper Kettle was over, she trudged down the sidewalk, her mind already on the shit ton of formulas she was going to have to wade through.

Why did English majors even have to do algebra? It wasn't like she was going to use it. Lost in her thoughts, she didn't perceive them until one of the boys stepped out in front of her. Plaid button down shirts, worn jeans and sneakers that had seen better days. They were clean cut and had been nice enough to her inside when she served them a pint or two.

But now there was an uneasy quality that set her teeth on edge.

They'd waited at the opening of the alley right next to the bar, leers plastered across their boy next door faces. "Hey, pretty girl. You looking for some action?"

"Nope." She kept on walking, thankful she lived only a few blocks away. God, why was it always the ones who looked normal that ended up being assholes?

It figured.

She gave a mental eye roll and proceeded down the sidewalk, her mind already shifting gears back to the exam looming over her the next day.

Then, she heard it. The scuff of a sneaker that was way too close. Mari paused in her footsteps and someone yanked her backwards by the hair, making her yelp and setting her off balance.

"What the…? Hey!"

One of the men grabbed her from behind and slammed her into the rough brick wall of the pub next door.

It hurt. A lot.

Tears stinging her eyes, she blinked them away and kicked the guy in front of her in the nads. He dropped and another one took his place, his hands getting a little too inquisitive for her comfort.

"Let go of me, you asshole."

"No." The fresh faced frat boys weren't so innocent after all.

The rest was a blur. Tearing clothes. Hands on her body and her screams echoing into the night. They were too strong and she didn't know how to fight them. Glowing eyes and teeth that shouldn't be that sharp ripped at the soft parts of her flesh, their fingers searching out places that she'd never shared with anyone, let alone being forced in a dark alley. It was all too real. Like the monster movies she'd been terrified of as a child, because part of her was afraid they were real.

"What are you?" She'd sobbed. "Let me go!"

"I think not, precious." The fiend leered at her again and she watched him change. A snout appeared where a face had been only moments before. Coarse hair sprouted from his skin and she heard his bones crack as he lifted his head to howl.

The others joined in their jubilation but stayed human, their eyes and too sharp teeth the only real evidence they shared his proclivities. They toyed with her. The men, now partially shifted into wolves, let her up, giving her the illusion of escape only to catch her a few feet down the alley and have at her once again. Her fear bled from stark terror to a gut clenching hate.

Their guttural laughter made her want to kill them. The revulsion kept her alive, and the knowledge that—if she ever did get up—she would find a way to make them pay for what they had done. Bloody and raw, she lay there, the unyielding concrete at her back, waiting to bleed out.

Shock and horror warred with the hate, and the latter won. It was the safest place she knew and she clung to it, trying to convince herself that the rest was a figment of her overworked imagination.

At least, that's what she wanted to believe.

One of them moved, giving her the opportunity to run if she could have, and her eyes riveted on the hazy street light on the main drag. Then, two more male forms came into view, their faces tight with rage. The taller man was a brooding presence with long dark hair that reminded her of that guy in the Bram Stoker Dracula movie. The other, a muscular golden haired god with liquid eyes she wanted to fall into. If these were the angels of death, she would go willingly.

"Here you are. I thought I heard the barking of dogs in my

alleyway." The dark haired man spoke with cultured menace, the power in his voice sending shivers down Mari's spine.

His teeth glinted in the half light.

What was going on?

"Your alley, Roark?" The golden haired man regarded him with a sardonic smile.

The men, now almost completely wolves, crouched down over Mari's body, low growls reverberating from their throats.

"Well, it isn't theirs." Roark barred his teeth and hissed, lunging forward with his walking stick aimed at the beasts. He struck the middle one between the eyes, stunning him.

"Fenris?"

"Got it."

The smaller of the three wolves lunged at the muscular blond man and he knocked the creature back on his haunches. Then the fray began. It was a blur of movement and startled yelps.

When all was done, one wolf lay still and unmoving at the Fenris' feet and the other two had vanished from sight.

Fenris kicked at the carcass in front of him, his lips twisted in disgust. "The Protectorate Council won't like this."

"No." Roark knelt down on one knee in front of Mari, her breath coming in shallow gasps. "They've crossed the line again, Fen. I can't let them claim another one."

Fenris stepped over the wolf and approached Mari, kneeling at her side. "What are you going to do? Leave her to shift? Kill her?"

"You could take her across to Faery."

Fenris shook his head. "And upset the balance? No. The veil between Faery and the mortal world is closed for a reason. I'll not have something else come through if I open it."

Roark sighed. "Then you leave me no choice." He stood and twisted his cane, a long sword emerging from the walking stick.

Terror gripped Mari.

He meant to kill her. She'd been so ready for death a moment ago, but now that it was staring her in the face, she grew afraid once more.

A tear slid from her eye, dampening her hair.

Fenris gazed down into her eyes and reached for her blood stained hand, gathering it into his own. Her breath hitched at the colors she found hidden in his gaze. And peace.

"Hello, witchling." His voice was soft, eyes ever assessing.

The witch in her recognized him. He was a prince of the Wild Hunt. Wild magic swirled around him and healed part of her tattered soul.

"You…" It hurt to speak. Or to move… breathe. Anything. It would be easier to die. Part of her wanted to.

"Do you want this? Do you choose death?" He brought his lips to hers and pressed them against her gently. "Or do you choose life?"

Something inside of her leapt at his kiss even as her ravaged body lay dying.

"Fenris…" Roark hissed, his eyes burning red. "I have never brought over another to this life."

The Fae lifted his head from Mari and considered him, then turned his eyes back to Mari. "Don't you think it's time you did?"

"It will go against everything. All the rules we've set in place."

Fenris stared at him with quiet intensity. "And this hasn't? You and I both know Duncan would never stand for what's happened any more than you or I did. He keeps his wolves in line. I can promise you, tomorrow night I'll be at his door discussing the matter. But, right now? Now we have a young witch bleeding out on our streets. Tell me, Roark, how fair that is when I can see the magic fading in her eyes for every second you delay?"

"*Fuck*." Roark growled. "You gamble with fate."

Fenris barked out a harsh laugh. "No, vampire. I gamble with nothing. This girl…" He angled his head down and Mari saw the golden green of his eyes. His full lips turned up in a half smile and he reached down to brush a strand of hair from her eyes. "This girl will surprise us all."

Roark slid the sword back into his walking stick with an ugly snarl and knelt down on the other side of her, his eyes scanning the street for passersby. "You have to let her go. Give her to me."

Roark slid her dead weight into his arms and placed his face close to hers, considering. "There is no turning back from this, my girl. You

become my daughter, birthed in blood. What say you?"

"I…" Mari gasped as the breath was torn from her and darkness ebbed at her vision.

"Roark. Do it now!" Fenris roared.

Dimly, she overheard a tearing of flesh and something drip across her too dry lips.

"Drink," the voice hissed and teeth slid into her neck.

She'd chosen life and she hadn't been sorry. She just wished Gibbs had been so lucky. The sadness in his eyes as he tried to reconnect with Bertrand was heartbreaking.

"I'll try and get him to listen to me tonight. I just don't want everyone to know about this, okay?"

"Yeah. Sure." Gibbs' lips twisted and he shook his head.

Mari glanced down at her boobs swelling over the top of the bodice and groaned. Jared didn't take no for an answer and Roark had been trying to get her to befriend the geeky vamp. The reason behind that wasn't exactly a mystery. His sire was another blood royal and, politically speaking, they would have been a perfect match.

Funny how she couldn't have cared less. All she wanted was to find Fenris and douse the fire that blazed through her blood. There was something dangerous and edgy about the Fae that made her want him all the more.

She dreamt of him the night before, his hand wrapped in her hair as he took her from behind, his cock filling all of her hollow places, both in her head and in her heart. He released his fist from her hair only to tease and torment her body into a quivering mass of sensations as she skittered over the edge into bliss.

Goddess but she needed a vibrator. Or a drink. Something. Anything to quell the insane desire to mate with the Fae lord.

Just thinking about him made her folds grow slick with want.

Get a damn grip. The man hardly knows you're alive.

The Vampire Ball was in full swing, couples dressed in sparkling finery and glittering jewels paraded along the elaborately decorated dance floor in her sire's home. In short. It was stuffy. And she'd been dragged downstairs to the event every year for the past decade in the

hopes that she would find a prince among the fanged elite.

Not on her life. Or unlife. Or whatever.

Semantics.

Part of her wondered if setting her up with a teenage horn dog was supposed to spur her on to find her own partner. Mate. Whatever. The point was, she didn't want one. Roark had been trying to push her into marriage, but so far she hadn't been impressed with his choice in candidates. Jared was a hundred year old vamp trapped in the body of a sixteen year old.

She scoured the room for Fenris, frowning when she didn't see him. An event like this usually brought out the Alpha wolf Duncan and the Fae lord. Jared appeared in her line of vision and she made out Gibbs's dark laughter a few feet away.

"Shut up."

"Be careful, Pigeon. Someone might hear you."

She opened her mouth to retort but shut it again as Jared stepped in front of her.

Mari pondered how long he'd had the zits that covered his forehead and if he would ever get rid of them. When she'd been turned all of her injuries had healed. It was part of the package. She wanted to feel sorry for the kid but every time he flapped his gums, she felt the urge to hurt him. Badly.

"Good evening, Mari. Roark tells me you're to be my escort for the night."

She didn't particularly like the way he said escort either. Kind of like hooker.

Hells no.

"I'll dance with you once, but I have plans."

"What kind of plans?"

If she had to stand here listening to him and his high pitched nasally voice all night she was going to do something drastic.

"I was going to get some air."

"We can do that." The twerp beamed up at her and Mari had to struggle not to roll her eyes. Gibbs laughter filled her head and she grit her teeth to keep from reacting. He placed his hand on the small

of her back and attempted to guide her to the ballroom. Only he didn't stop there. His hand kept creeping down and his face leaned into her, his hot breath on the skin of her shoulder. She walked faster, winding her way between couples, hoping by some miracle he'd gotten lost. But no. He was still here, his grasping, clammy hands reaching for her once again.

Ugh.

This was going to be one long ass night. She could see it already.

"A dance then?"

"Fine."

He slid his arm around her, again sliding down to cop a feel. She grabbed his hands and put them back on her waist.

"Stay."

"Why?"

"Because you're a presumptive little shit, that's why. Keep your hands where they belong or I'm going to feed them to one of the werewolves."

The kid chuckled, a gleam in his eye. "You're so sexy when you're mad."

Mari almost threw up in her mouth. All she wanted to do was wander the streets and experience Salem in full swing. And she would even if she had stuff dork boy in a potted plant. Ten minutes tops and she was out the door.

With Halloween almost here one of the favorite things she loved to do was walk the Psychic Fair and check out all the witchy action. Instead she had an octopus in training wheels trying to get to second base in the middle of the dance floor. He leaned into her, fangs extended.

She so didn't need this shit.

"I'm not your personal juice box, boy wonder so get your fangs out of my face." Mari growled and shoved the overanxious teenage vampire off of her for the third time.

She should stake him with a stir stick from the bar. Maybe no one would notice.

"What?" Jared whined, his fangs popping back into place. "I

thought you were, you know…ready to…"

"To what? Shove my shoe up your ass maybe?" God, she *hated* the little shit. She should have just disappeared like she did every year. Roark would have been mad, but what was the saying? Better to ask forgiveness than permission? Something like that. She'd rather drink poison than socialize with her kind. It was either politics or who was going to meld Houses by marriage. And this kid.

He reached for her again and she slapped his hands away, her irritation growing.

"Why don't you go play at the kiddy table? I have to go."

"But you just got here," he whined, kicking his polished black dress shoe against the floor in a juvenile action.

God.

"Yeah. And I'm leaving so get off me, troll."

Mari's lacy black and silver dress was pretty, but it the underside itched like the very devil. Not to mention the thong the sales woman talked her into to match her garter and stockings was riding so far up her ass it might as well have been flossing something.

"You can't leave. Not yet. I…have to ask you something."

"I'm done. Sorry." She went to move past him, her heels hard on the polished wooden floor.

Roark would be pissed, but one more minute of Jared and she was going to do something drastic. Besides, her Sire could want her to befriend the pain in the ass vamp all he wanted, but he wasn't the one who had to repel the little twerp's advances.

Jared scurried to cut her off, lunging forward, fangs out.

Onlookers gasped, then tittered with laughter as she repelled him, knocking his scrawny ass to the floor.

"Watch out, Pigeon. I don't think he's quite ready to give up yet." Gibbs commented drily.

"No kidding."

"Who are you talking to?"

"No one."

Damn it Gibbs.

Hells bells. And she wasn't supposed to make a scene either. That

made it harder to leave. Jared scrambled up and came at her again but this time she was ready.

It was like being propositioned then humped by your best friend's kid brother. Or a giant mosquito. So she swatted him. With her fist.

"You heard me, asshole. Back. The. Fuck. Off." The skin of her collarbone was still recoiling from his fangs scraping across her flesh in an effort to reach her neck.

Little fucker.

"But…Roark said you had to be nice to me." He gave her a smarmy little smile and raised his chin.

"Oh? You want me to be *nice*?" Mari did a quick scan of the room, her eyes narrowing on the French doors. She stalked out to the open patio leaving the push of the crowd behind.

When Jared reached out to grab her again, she used her foot to kick his heel out from under him and he fell to the flagstones with an audible whomp.

"Here. You want something to make tonight memorable?" Mari reached beneath her dress and tugged at her thong, amused at the wide eyed expression on the little maggot's face. Hell. He probably thought she was going to give it up to him. Not even if pigs flew and the world was taken over by flying Minions in grass hula skirts.

She slid the offending thong down her legs and kicked it off. Reaching down, she used the lacy underwear to bind the little bastard's hands together.

"Are you going to spank me?"

"Oh. This is priceless. Wait till I bring tell the others." Gibbs snorted, the deep belly laughs making her frown.

"You're horrible."

"*Who* are you always talking to?"

"You really don't want to know."

The wood pushing at the fly of his pants about made her gag.

"You wish." Instead, she tugged him up from the ground and hooked his wrists to the handle of one of the hanging metal planters leaving him straining on his tip toes.

"Hey. Where are you going? Mari!"

Mari glanced back at the ball room, startled to see Bertrand gazing out the window. Could he see him? She whispered a spell under her breath and hoped to the Goddess it worked.

"Gibbs. Window. Nine o'clock."

"Oh! Mari. I love you!" The ghost sailed past her, hopefully to have a meaningful encounter with his old lover. She was sure she'd hear about it in the morning either way.

"Where are you *going*?" Jared screeched, struggling against the tightly bound underwear.

Perhaps she should rethink her hatred of thongs. Maybe the things did have a purpose after all.

She didn't answer. Instead, she whistled to herself and smiled up at the moon, her teeth sharp in her mouth. It was time for some action and she knew just where to go. The witches were out there was no stopping her now.

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CHAPTER TWO

"Another one." Fenris stared down at the body of a murdered pixie and another fracture worked its way through his heart. Her broken body lay, wings broken, her limbs encased in skinny jeans and a tattered sweater with a bottle of what appeared to be doctored honey lying near her outstretched hand. Her lips were pale, her eyes glazed over in a sheen of death. Her other hand lay closed in a fist around something that appeared to be a chain but he couldn't see what it was the way it was pressed against her body.

Seeing her there reminded him of one of the first near death's he'd come across when he and Roark, the vampire Master of the City had begun to sweep the streets. The rogue wolves had only begun their reign of terror and Duncan was so grief stricken by the recent death of his mate he was in no fit condition to rule. The wolves knew it and there were those among them who decided to take advantage of the situation.

When he came upon the young witch in the alley, he had no way to discern just how complex the situation would become. Roark was still not entirely happy with him after he pressured him into turning the girl. Mari.

Fenris didn't regret it. The longing in her eyes as she stared into his was enough to take his breath away. He came to Essex House often to speak with Roark about goings on in the city, each time hoping to catch a glimpse of her.

She haunted his dreams and that didn't even begin to cover how massively fucked up that was. The girl had just been mauled within inches of her life ending and there he stood, his cock twitching in his pants wondering how sweet her lips would be to taste and how tight she would feel as he sank inside of her.

Gods.

Anyone who thought Fae were creatures of light were as foolish as

the ones that believed fairy tales had happy endings. With the tug of magic came the irrepressible thirst for pain and the hunger for darkness that came with it.

That was why he fled his Queen. Any excuse to put distance between them was a much needed thing. As Captain of the Guard he had spent more time in her bedchambers than any other male in her service. There was a reason she was the Queen of the Dark Court and it wasn't because she loved the color black. No. He learned that pain and pleasure rode each other and the raw hunger it left inside of him made him afraid.

He was charged with keeping order on this side of Faery and he meant to do as the Queen commanded. It was the least he could do to remain in her good tidings. To do anything less was to invite her involvement and that he would not and could not risk. In the centuries he'd been here, he'd come to understand more about the delicate balance that kept the human world in artificial isolation from the paranormal community. Under no circumstance were the two realities to cross paths. Those that risked it found themselves on the receiving end of his wrath. That and the rest of the Protectorate Council.

This was the second death in three days and like the first one, she was found behind the one of the local pubs, very near the fairground. Her body ravaged by what appeared to be an animal attack, he shuddered to think what her last hours may have been like.

Night had fallen fast, the scent of burning leaves tickling his nose with the promise of colder weather to come. October was a month of transitions. And this time he didn't like the pattern that was evolving.

Humans were everywhere, the city of Salem draped in witchery and all things metaphysical. Parties, events, shops and eateries all catered to the unique flavor of this city and Fenris had been proud to call it home for centuries. Torn between the world of Faery and the human plane, if he could be anywhere, he supposed he was glad it was here. It was a shame that most couldn't see the magic that boiled around them, hotter than any witch's cauldron.

Fenris's lips twisted in disgust as the two fae guards assigned to monitor the door to the gateway whispered and gestured to

themselves instead of paying attention to gawking onlookers. All they would see was a dead human girl but that was enough to get tongues wagging.

"Are you two done talking?"

"Yes, sir." The younger of the two at least had the sense to look contrite.

The crime scene techs appeared, followed by the EMS personnel.

"I want you to assist these people with anything they need done. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Captain."

"Good." He took a deep breath and stepped away from the glut of people and Fae, walking into the shadows. There had to be signs of the wolves here someplace. At least, if the idiots hadn't trampled them into the ground already.

He cocked his head and let his eyes wander to the buzz of the city and the frivolity of the Halloween events only to find his gaze drawn to a familiar and not entirely unwelcome sight.

Mari Di Bartolo made her way down the middle of the street clad in what had to be the poofiest dress he'd ever seen on a woman. Her black hair long and flowing, she looked like vampire princess she was, draped in flounces of silver and black, her breasts threatening to spill from their confines at any moment.

His palms itched to touch her and he forced his hands down to his sides. Roark would never approve of his interest. Without thinking, he moved in her direction. "What are you doing here? This is a crime scene."

She raised her chin, a challenge in her eyes. Her red lips parted in response and he wanted to yank her to him and do what he should have done a thousand times before if only for the blasted fear of hurting her. He wanted to kiss the shadows from her eyes but he also realized that living through what she had been through would leave scars no one could erase, especially a Fae with a penchant for pain.

"What does it look like I'm doing? I'm taking in the sights. It's Salem at Halloween."

"In a dress like that?"

She shrugged. “I was bored. And Roark had me paired up with Jared for the evening. You weren’t there.”

Was that an accusation in her tone?

Anger he didn’t have any right to feel seethed under his skin when he noticed the scrape along her collarbone.

“What is this?” He reached out, his fingers brushing against her flesh and she shivered beneath his touch.

“Jared, the pimply faced octopus. Well, before I balled him up and left him in the garden for them to find. Maybe they’ll come across him before dawn.”

“Let him fry.” The scrawny vamp didn’t know when to keep his hands to himself. He’d encountered several prostitutes on the streets who’d said as much, only they sported marks much worse than Mari. And hers would heal within the hour.

Her eyes widened and her lips parted and he caught a glimpse of fang. “I… didn’t know you cared.”

“If I didn’t, why would I have convinced Roark to turn you?” He tugged her closer, the push of her breasts against his chest making it hard to concentrate on mere words. He’d known she was meant for him from the first second he’d seen her but he had to let Roark take her or risk her dying.

“You don’t know me. I was just a girl on the street. A human not worth your consideration.”

Fenris didn’t miss the hurt in her eyes. Perhaps he had been wrong leaving her alone. He’d been convinced he was right letting her assimilate unhindered into her new life. He also couldn’t fault her reasoning. She was right. They had no claim on one another, only an attraction that blazed to life in the most untenable of situations.

But she was wrong on one account. He had noticed her before–just not in a way he might have acted upon. Human and supernatural interaction was forbidden but he was unable to let her die. Not like that.

He wasn’t able to stop thinking about her and hadn’t since that night.

“I did notice you, witchling. How could I not?” He lifted a finger

and traced the side of her face, his cock hardening at the moan that slipped unbidden from her lips. “You burn inside of me. Only I couldn’t act. Not until then. But I had to save you. To do anything else…” He let his voice trail off and watched her reaction.

Mari blinked and reached forward, pressing her lips to his. “It’s like a fire, isn’t it? A fire in the blood.”

“Oh Gods, yes.”

He tugged her forward and captured her lips with his own, pressing her soft form against his hardness, trying to resist the urge to play the animal and take her hard against the nearest wall.

No.

She didn’t deserve that. Not from him and certainly not with what she’d lived through.

She wound her arms around him and thrust her fingers into his hair. “Don’t stop.”

“I don’t want to. But if we do this a moment longer, I’m afraid I’ll be in danger of either being arrested or embarrassing myself utterly.”

This was neither the time nor place to explore their attraction to one another. Not with the crime scene but a few feet behind him. But there was an overwhelming attraction. Hot, heavy and one that would lead him into trouble if he wasn’t careful.

Fuck. He’d *been* careful and look where that had gotten him? Since he’d met the enigmatic young woman, no other female came close. He dreamt of her and that made him question his sanity. Was he that imbued with the sickness of his Queen that he fantasized about a girl who had nearly died in his arms?

But she wasn’t dead, was she?

Mari stood in front of him, the same desire mirrored in the red of her eyes and he bet if he slipped his hand beneath that very elegant dress, he’d find her wet.

“Come with me.” She pressed her lips against his and urged him forward. “There’s an alcove.”

“Lead on.” He brought her hand to his lips and pressed a kiss to her soft, rose petal skin.

She slipped her hand through his arm and they walked along the

sidewalk, her eyes scanning the booths and activities that made up the Psychic Fair. Witches, both real and self-created sold their wares and he sensed her desire to be among them.

"This is what you came out here for."

She nodded, a smile turning up her lips. "It was. In part."

"What else?"

Mari smiled secretly and tugged him into a side alley and into what resembled a faery garden, if such a thing existed in an old church yard. It was as if they had stepped out of Salem and stepped back in time.

Brambles and vines covered the high stone fence and the ruins of the old church sprawled out into the open. A lone stone bench sat amongst the trees and she led him to it.

She turned to him, her eyes aglow in the half light. "This. This is what else."

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CHAPTER THREE

Mari's heart beat inside of her chest as she gazed up at Fenris. She hadn't expected to see him out here on the streets but now that she had, she wasn't letting him go. Not without once and for all letting him know how she felt. Bringing him here to her hidden alcove had been a risk but one she was willing to take.

He'd seemed just as happy to see her as she had to encounter him and that in itself gave her stomach a few more butterflies.

She leaned in closer and he gripped her arms, the erection straining against the front of his pants digging into her stomach. Mari wanted him like she had wanted no other man, the spicy scent of him invading all of her senses.

"I…" She swayed, lifting her face to his and he claimed her mouth with a ragged groan. His tongue parted her lips and he pulled her even closer, her breasts spilling out over the confines of the bodice.

"You are so lovely." He bent his head down and pressed a kiss on the tip of her left breast, then drew it into his mouth. The stabbing sensation of ecstasy made her knees weak and she let go a soft cry as he steadied her, a swift rush of heat rushing between her thighs.

She slid her shaking hand down the front of his pants, cupping him, then taking a chance, tightened her hold until he let out an audible hiss.

"You're playing with fire, girl."

Mari met his gaze with one of her own. "I'm not a *girl*. Not for a long time now."

"Then don't play the coquette with me." He gripped her wrist, his teeth clenched as if he were straining.

He was dangerous. Not like a vampire, but different somehow. Like he could drink in her soul and leave her writhing beneath him. His golden green eyes seared into hers and she trembled.

"I'm not." Mari swallowed. She had to end this…this distraction

that boiled her blood. Was he the mate Roark had told her of? It infuriated her that her body would call the shots this way. It also scared her. She hungered for him and no other. This had been building, at least for her, since she'd seen him and tonight she had to push herself-and him to see where it would lead.

"I can smell your fear." Fenris's voice was raw and he buried his face at the base of her neck, licking and sucking on her earlobe. Her nipples hardened to fine points and every brush of his blazer and button down shirt made her want to climb him like a fucking tree.

He craved her just as much as she desired him. She read it in his eyes.

"And I can scent your yearning." She shook his hand off and reached for the zipper on his pants. She tugged it down and his cock sprang free, the hard length of him hot against her palm.

"Gods," he ground out and his heartbeat sped up to match hers. "I need…"

"I know." Her fangs dropped and she stifled a moan as the tip of him pearled, Fenris's arousal betraying his warring emotions.

She pushed him down on the bench and straddled him, her slick folds sliding over him. Fenris sucked in a breath as she reached beneath her skirt and in one quick movement, impaled herself on his engorged member.

"Mari. *Gods.*"

He gripped her hips and slid his hand beneath her ass lifting her. He sank balls deep inside of her and lowered her to the ground. Mari's head lolled as the sensation of being fully stretched rolled through her.

"Here." He shrugged off his blazer and laid it on the grass next to her, shifting her body so it would be protected from the ground.

"Take me. Mark me," Mari panted. "I can't take it. Please…"

Fenris growled and angled himself, withdrawing slightly, and then plowed inside of her with one deft motion.

She wanted skin on skin but that would be later. Now was for claiming. All heat and passion and all the pent up need she'd been carrying with her since she began this new life.

He grunted, his powerful form moving within her, bringing her fire from the inside out until she clutched at him, her channel spasming.

"I'm…" Mari lost control as her body exploded into a millions stars, he the force behind it all.

"That's it, witchling. Come on my cock. *Fuck.*" He groaned, the motion of his hips growing more insistent until he cried out, his voice thick as he buried his face in her hair, his teeth piercing her neck, marking her with his bite.

Pleasure and pain warred within her and Mari's teeth distended. She sank them deep into Fenris's shoulder, the sweet, hot blood flowing over her tongue even as he filled her womb with his seed.

It was perfect. There was a rock under her left butt cheek. She reached beneath her and dug it out from under the dress and flung it to the side.

"Ouch."

"Sorry."

"No. It's fine." She giggled, imagining the sour housekeeper when she saw the grass stains on the bottom of her skirt. It would be… priceless.

She sighed and lay back, tingling from head to foot. Fenris lay with his weight on her, his strange golden eyes peering into hers. "This complicates things."

"I know. Roark…"

"I don't care about Roark. I care about you."

"What were you doing out here tonight? I looked for you at the ball." Mari ran her fingertips down the side of his face, marveling at the beauty of his incredible man. He twitched within her and she smiled.

"The wolves…" He looked away and started to move, sadness dimming the light in his eyes.

He was part of the Protectorate. She was no fool. She'd seen the crime scene tape and the glut of people. Someone had died and it was at the hands of the wolves.

"No. Don't." She clenched herself around him and he sucked in a breath. "Whatever it is we'll figure it out together. Tomorrow. But first

I want to try something."

"What's that witchling?" His eyes were wary.

"I want to get grass stains all over your ass and then…" she kissed him, her teeth worrying on his lower lip.

"And then what?"

"I want you to take me to the ball."

Fenris grinned. "Now that would be the end of a very interesting day." He gathered her in his arms and flipped her over so she was riding him, her dress covering them both. His cock swelled hard and thick inside of her and she ground herself on him, making him gasp.

"I thought you might say that." Mari grinned, using her hips to make his eyes cross. "You know what they say. Ride a faery save a horse. Or something like that."

He laughed, the brightness returning to his eyes. "Oh love. How much fun it will be getting to know you better."

"Oh I think it will be." Mari leaned down and nipped him on the nose, her breasts just out of reach of his lips. She angled her hips and clenched her muscles around him. "Just hold on, cause it's going to be one bumpy ride."

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Erzabet Bishop is the bestselling and award winning author of Spirit Board, Wicked for You, Crave, Burning for You, Black Magic Café, Sanguine Shadows, Hedging Her Bets, Malediction, Heart's Protector and Club Beam, among others. She is a contributor to many anthologies. She lives in Texas with her husband, furry children and often plays at local bookstores.

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Fallen by Danielle Gavan

Sworn to protect those who believed in his gods, Fallen has defended humanity from the shadows of night for thousands of years. But Alexander Leka, the man behind the fangs, refuses to relinquish his humanity to the whims of blood-sucking deities. His life and eternity are dedicated to their service—until those very gods suddenly disappear, and leave Fallen's fate in the hands of another. The key to his salvation? A woman whose beauty haunted him through the ages. Zoe Mesha lives in the shadows, hiding from the sun and the sickness it brings. She dreams of warm beaches, basking under a pale blue sky, and a man with the most unusual eyes. Zoe is certain her dream man doesn't exist and that his amber orbs are a figment of her fascination with the sun. But when he comes to her rescue one night she can't shake off a crippling tide of fear as they come face to face with each other. Convincing Zoe to look beyond his vampirism and see him for the man within will not be an easy task. If anything, it will be the greatest battle of Fallen's life. One he must win, at all costs.

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Fallen: A Northern Bites Novella
by Danielle Gavan

CHAPTER ONE

Vampirism in the twenty first century sucked. Pun? Yeah, totally intended. I slapped a bag of O negative to my fangs and sat back, a cold can of Coors to wash it down in my left hand. Its five friends, the remainder of a six pack, chilled in a cooler on the floor beside me. Who was I kidding? Being a blood sucker hadn't been a barrel of laughs since the moment the gods turned me two thousand years ago. I swung my feet up, the heels of my heavy boots thudding onto the wooden top of my cherry wood coffee table beside the large bacon, heavy cheese, and double garlic buttered crust waiting for me. The food wasn't a necessity, unlike the blood, but hell would be let out for recess before I'd give it up.

O-neg coated my tongue and slid down my throat, pushing a shudder through me as I tried not to gag from the thick copper penny taste. I reminded myself that this was better than having to bite some poor schmuck I'd picked off the streets. The only thing I liked to drink straight from the tap came in a glass, a bottle or a can. Anything else came from a private supplier hired to keep the need at bay. I'd tried not feeding once. The results? Disastrous. For me. For the village I'd massacred. Men, women and children. None of them were safe from the bloodlust raging inside of me. I valued my humanity too much to risk it again. Yes, I saw the irony there.

The heavy plastic curled against my chin as the blood bag emptied of its lukewarm contents. A half-ounce remained in the bag, and it would stay there. Fully emptying the pouch meant listening to the nerve fraying 'straw sucking at the bottom of an empty cup' sound, and I avoided the torture of hearing it at all costs. I tossed the shriveled container, fist pumping the air as it caught the rim of the

trash can across the room and plopped inside.

Garlic lifted his head from the cushion he occupied on the window seat, tail uncurled and thumping against the wall beneath. He gave me a bored blink, perking up as he spotted the pizza between us. His one-eyed stare focused with laser-like precision, and the pink tip of his sandpaper tongue flicked out to lick his jowls. Not one to be deceived by his faux-lazy demeanor, I set my beer aside and leaned forward to pick up the cardboard box.

"Not a chance, kitty cat." Eyes narrowed at the wily feline, I settled the pizza in my lap and picked up a large piece of cheesy, garlic laced, bacon filled goodness. Garlic gave me a half-assed meow and settled back down on his cushion with the kitty version of a huff. Good boy. I made a note to bring home a snack for the old mouser after making my rounds.

Mouth filled with pizza, I chewed slowly, in no rush to hustle out the door and into the frigid night air. Early spring nights in Northern Ontario sucked. The weather, at best, could be described as schizophrenic. Mother Nature, the crazy bitch, needed another dose of her meds. I glanced out the sleet glazed bay window, the half-acre expanse of my backyard visible above the hump of Garlic's scrawny back. Large swaths of green grass stretched between long bars of ice and snow. With any luck the temperature outside would be warm enough to prevent the sleet tapping against my windows from sticking and turning the roads into skating rinks. My truck was a 4 x 4 but black ice didn't give two shits about that kind of thing.

The cushion beside me vibrated and I looked over at the cell phone resting on the black leather. I picked it up, tapping the text message icon with my thumb. A select few people knew my number. I could count them on one hand, all of them brethren vampires. I opened the text from Noah and scanned the message. *Coming out*? Tapping in the reply box, I responded with a sarcastic smiley face emoticon. In six hundred years of patrolling the area together, I'd missed one night and only because a bad bag of blood had laid me low with an unprecedented case of hugging the porcelain throne. My bathroom had looked like the scene of a massacre by the time I'd expelled all of

the tainted blood. The smartass wouldn't let me forget it either. My phone vibrated again. *See you in the trenches, asshole.* I laughed and took another bite of gooey garlicky goodness as I rose from the couch. Someone had ants in his pants about getting the show on the road.

Garlic hopped down from the window, stalking me into the kitchen. I popped the leftover pizza in the fridge and shut the door, narrowly missing the pink tip of his greedy little nose. The cat gave me a growl mixed with a hiss as I walked away and ignored him. A full to the brim bowl of the best cat food money could buy sat across the kitchen. The pizza? Mine. We'd had this discussion before. I wasn't budging on the subject.

***

Forty minutes later I spotted Noah leaning against the wall of our usual meeting spot, a ball cap pulled low over his brow. A smile quirked up the corners of my lips as I pulled the truck around a corner and parked against the curb. The guy was six foot four and built like an ox. A baseball cap wasn't going to help him go incognito any more than a frilly dress would. People tended to notice guys our size. It was a fact of life for us.

"Hey, man." He pushed off the wall as I drew close, falling into step with me. I lifted my chin in greeting and glanced at the hat covering his golden blond locks. Noah shrugged and jammed both hands in his jacket pockets, ignoring my unspoken criticism. "So, hunt or surveil tonight?"

I focused on our surroundings, senses opened to those brave enough to wander the streets at this hour. A couple fornicated in an alley a few streets over. Humans. I wrote them off as a hooker and her john. By the tone of her moaning, she was a seasoned pro at faking it 'til he made it. Other than those two, Noah and myself the streets echoed with a definitive absence of population—human, or otherwise. Odd. "Let's play it by ear."

Noah cast a glance my way, his right eyebrow raised. The silver sheen of his irises gleamed in the shadows beneath the ball cap brim.

“You noticed it too, huh?” He resumed scanning the street, eyes trained to pick out even the most minute disturbance in the city’s energy. “It’s like a ghost town tonight, except without the ghosts.”

The night loomed around us, eerily quiet for a city the size of Sudbury on a Saturday night in April. Not a college or university student in sight. The usual gaggle of teenagers who hung out by the pizza shop? AWOL. Even the homeless were nowhere to be found. Oh yeah. Something was definitely fishy in Fishville.

“Keep your eyes peeled,” I instructed. He nodded and we continued down Elm Street toward Notre Dame. Street lights lined our path, spotlighting us like the rock stars every few feet. Thing was, I didn’t feel very rock star-ish. Tired? Yep. Bored? You bet. I’d been around for over two thousand years of the same old same old crap. Yes, I’d signed on for this gig. Stupid, naïve me eagerly volunteered to be a defender of mankind. I rolled my eyes and snorted. What a crock of shit.

Noah nudged me with his elbow and I cut a glance in his direction. He watched me from beneath the brim of his hat, eyes narrowed, scrutinizing. “You okay?”

I nodded, and jammed my hands into my jacket pockets. Not the best idea should the need to defend myself arise, but who was I kidding? There wasn’t anyone around to defend, or anything to fight. Not your typical night on the Fallen and Noah show. “Yeah,” I huffed. “Just bored as fuck. We haven’t seen anything in days. I’m getting antsy.”

“Maybe,” he hesitated and I tensed, aware of where Noah was going with the rest of his thought. I cut him off with a growl and he brought up his hands. “Hey, I’m just saying. It might be worth the trouble to, you know, bug the powers that be and see what’s up.”

His suggestion, while valid, was a path I refused to tread. The gods and I enjoyed a love-hate relationship. Mostly one sided. I loved to hate them. Issues? Nah, I had volumes. Two thousand years worth of them. The less contact between that gang of narcissists and myself, the better.

Less than a second after that thought cross my mind the energy current shifted around Noah and I. Our gazes collided, the hairs on the

back of my neck standing on end. I eased my hands free of my jacket pockets and gave my arms a slight shake to release the energy built up in them. My knuckles cracked from the tension as I flexed my fingers into loose fists and prepared to use the only superpower the gods had seen fit to gift me.

The night suddenly burst with sound and presence. People. Creatures. Everywhere.

Noah laid a hand on my forearm, and I halted the process of calling my sword. Brandishing a four-foot length of polished steel in a crowd this size would not bode well for either of us. A night in the City of Greater Sudbury's jail was not on my bucket list.

"Shit," Noah hissed from my left. He nudged my shoulder and I tossed him a glance. Chin lifted, his gaze flicked toward something in the distance on my right. "Things just got real."

Following his line of site, I immediately picked out the two things that froze the blood in my veins. Her, and the minion advancing on her from across the street with its razor sharp teeth bared, a thin line of venom dripping from an incisor. This was no cutesy, banana loving, Disney/Pixar creation. No. This was something much more sinister.

I kicked into motion, boots pounding pavement, even though I knew it was too late to stop the evil creature from reaching her. Super-speed was not something I possessed. I ran at a human pace. Granted, somewhat faster than most, but still a snail's pace compared to that with which the minion was gaining on its target. I couldn't stop it from reaching her, but I'd let myself be damned for another thousand years before I allowed any harm to come to her.

"Is that…?" Noah ran beside me, his strides matching mine as we tore up the sidewalk. He caught my eye and I gave a quick, curt nod. Yes, yes it was.

Her. Zoe. The woman who'd haunted my dreams every day for two thousand years. The woman for whom I'd given my life to the gods in exchange for hers. The woman those same gods brought back time and again to torment me with what I could no longer have—her love.

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CHAPTER TWO

Crisp spring air caressed my face as I stepped outside. A door closed behind me, shutting out the boisterous noise coming from my favorite café, Let's Scrabbalatte. Saturday game nights were always a little more rambunctious than others.

Hands wrapped around a paper cup, I let the heat from the liquid inside warm my chilled fingers. The delicious aromas of toffee and whipped cream tickled my nose and I brought my Zombie Crunch Latte to take a sip of the decadent treat. Heated milk, just a touch below scalding, coated the interior of my mouth and filled my senses with the taste of toffee, whipped cream and chocolate cookie powder. I turned toward home, opting to walk back and catch up on the work I'd fallen behind on instead of participating in game night as I usually did on Saturdays. An early spring cold had knocked me flat earlier in the week, and now I was paying the price with a weekend spent indoors in front of my computer.

Paying just enough attention to avoid walking into anyone, I didn't notice anything amiss until the sound of boots pounding pavement and my name being called pulled me from my musings. I stopped and scanned the surrounding area, freezing like a deer caught in the headlights of a tractor trailer when I spotted the creature. Skin the color of ripe blueberries, sharp teeth dripping what I could only assume was some sort of venom, and eerie, glowing white eyes devoid of a pupil or iris.

I made a mental note to stop watching paranormal movies before bed, and squeezed my eyes shut, hoping that when I opened them again the creature would be gone—a figment of my overstimulated imagination. But, when I cracked the lid of my right eye open it was still there. Closer and just as creepy as before. The primitive part of my brain, the one in charge of making life or death decisions, urged me to choose: fight or flight.

“Zoe,” a male voice called. “Move. Run.”

The words registered, but I stood there, incapable of moving as my muscles twitched with indecision. My latte crashed to the pavement, splattering hot milk all over my feet and soaking through the mesh tops of my running shoes.

A fleeting thought about how hard it would be to get the milk out later crossed my mind in the same moment the creature reached out a large, claw tipped hand toward me. It gripped my throat, squeezed, and cut off the scream I’d built up. My feet lifted from the sidewalk, my body dangling from the creature’s grip as it pulled me closer. Empty white eyes captivated my attention, drawing me in and rendering me docile. Every instinct urged me to fight, kick, scream, claw, anything to save myself.

“The gods won’t sssssave you now, pretty.” The creature slurred, spittle dotting my face. With my body paralyzed shuddering was impossible, but the mental squick-fest it caused? Epic. It licked up my left cheek from chin to temple, leaving a slimy trail in the wake of its sandpaper tongue. The clomp of heavy boots grew closer. Pinpricks of pain stabbed into my neck, and I sent up a silent prayer that whoever it was arrived sooner rather than later.

Warmth trickled down my skin, tickling along my collarbones before it dipped into the valley of my cleavage. *Of course*, I thought as the creature swiped its feline tongue through the trail of blood. *The one night I decide to wear white Nightcrawler’s evil cousin turns me into a midnight snack. Perfect.*

“Damn it, Zoe!” The voice, the same masculine rumble from before, grew closer. My vision fogged, darkness tinging the edges of reality. “Fight the minion, woman. You can’t die. Not now.” Die? Minon? I frowned, the only muscle control I seemed capable of achieving, and wondered why the stranger cared. His voice? Unfamiliar. I’d remember having heard it before. The warm rumble of it, the caress of each word. And the creature death-gripping my throat was so not a minion. No, those were adorable little yellow pill-shaped animated characters. Minions did not exist!

I gave a mental shake, cursing myself for behaving like one of the

too-stupid-to-live heroines in so many of the romance novels I'd read. Death was, quite literally, staring me in the face and my concern was about why my would-be rescuer sounded familiar, or the existence of actual minions? Yikes.

A fresh wave of pain swept through me, burning a path from the punctures at my throat and down into my spine. Darkness encroached further into my field of vision. The chill nipping at my fingers as I'd stepped out of the café laced its way through my paralyzed muscles. I silently cursed the addiction to Zombie Crunch lattés that had brought me out into the streets, and ultimately, to my own death.

The minion, so glad I had a name for it now, pulled me close—its face a hairsbreadth away from mine. I had a moment to register the flash of a sword, and the man standing behind my attacker, before mind-numbing pain slammed into me and the encroaching darkness sucked me under. "Goodbye, Princess."

Princess? What?

***

Warm lips pressed to mine. Fingertips brushed across the line of my jaw, tilting my head up, and I relaxed. I remembered this dream.; it was one of my favorites. In a moment, my lover's tongue would sweep inside, his tongue dancing with mine as he crushed our bodies together. Mmmm, yes… I definitely liked this dream.

Air blasted into my lungs, filling them to capacity, and my eyes flew open as I spluttered my way to consciousness. "What in…," I rasped, but stopped cold as beautiful amber eyes came into focus above me. Familiar eyes—ones I'd only ever seen in my dreams. "Helloooo, sexy."

Clearly, I was dreaming and let myself relax back into the fantasy. "God, I love this dream. Where were we?"

"Dream?" The inky black brows above those stunning eyes drew down into a frown. "Fuck, Zoe… This isn't a dream."

Someone in the vicinity chuckled. "She thinks you're a dream, Fall. That's funny." Mr. Dreamy shot a glance over his shoulder and the

chuckles stopped. I couldn't see the other man, but if I was a betting woman, I'd wager Chucklehead had his hands up in an 'I surrender' gesture.

A gentle tap on my left cheek brought my attention back to the man hovering above my right side. The corners of his lush, full lips tipped up, but the warmth didn't reach his eyes. "You were attacked. Noah and I took care of the minion, but your wounds need tending. I'm going to move my hand now so we can get a better look at you. Okay?"

I moved my head to nod and hot, vicious pain slashed through me. Memories flood back in: dark blue skin, empty white eyes and pain—so much pain. I winced and reached up with my left hand, the fingertips brushing against Mr. Dreamy's wrist as I felt for the wounds on my neck. "Shit. That was real? Nightcrawler's cousin really attacked me?" I frowned. "But, wait… I'm not dead?"

Dreamy snorted and my gaze shifted to his. "No, Zoe, you're not dead. Give us a sec and Noah will heal you. Then… I'll explain everything. Okay?"

This time around I knew better than to nod, and blinked to show him my agreement. I didn't understand what was going on, but there was plenty of time for questions after this Noah person did whatever he needed to fix me up.

Noah, whom I assumed was the chuckler, stepped into my field of vision. He knelt to my left, on the opposite side of Mr. Dreamy, and graced me with a mega-watt smile from beneath the brim of his baseball cap. I had a Riddick moment as his eyes flashed silver in the moonlight. That one I chalked up to blood loss and an overly active imagination. No one had eyes like that in real life.

"Close your eyes and just relax." Fingers grazed the skin beneath my ears, callouses scratching over on either side of my neck as he probed the wounds Nightcrawler Jr. had left behind. "This shouldn't hurt… Much."

I cracked my eyelids open, glaring at him from beneath my lashes, and he flashed me another smile. Funny guy. If I hadn't been laying in a puddle of my own blood, I might have laughed. As it was, I shut my

eyes and waited.

“All done,” he stated a moment later. Large hands wrapped around my right wrist, and cupped the elbow on the same side. I looked up, gaze colliding with that of Mr. Dreamy as he pulled me to a sitting position. A shadow loomed over us and I turned to find Noah standing on my other side. He nodded and tipped the bill of his ball cap. “I’ll leave you in Fallen’s capable hands. My boy’s got some ‘splaining to do.”

Fallen, as I’d learned was Mr. Dreamy’s name, nodded. “You going back out?”

“Yup,” Noah waved and walked off, blending into the shadows as if he’d never been there.

“Come on.” Fallen helped me up, one hand on my back and the other on my bicep, to steady me. He slung the heavy leather jacket he’d been wearing around my shoulders and stared me down when I opened my mouth to protest. “Your t-shirt’s covered in blood, Zoe. Wear it.” I shut my mouth, but refused to tamp down the mutinous glare directed at him. “I’ll get you another one of those… Whatever it was you were drinking and we’ll talk.” He nudged the empty cup with the toe of his boot as he turned toward Let’s Scrabbalatte. “I figure you’ve got a million questions going through that pretty head of yours right about now. Yeah?”

I shook my head and dug my heels in. “If you don’t mind, I think I’m going to take a break from Zombie Crunches for a while. Can we…” Glancing over my shoulder, I tilted my head toward the Tim Horton’s further down the street. “Would you mind?”

“Zombie… What?” He blinked at me and then shook his head, waving away whatever he’d been about to say. “Nevermind. Yeah. Tim’s is cool.”

The hand cupping my elbow dropped away as we fell into step together, but the one warming the small of my back remained, spreading goosebumps over my skin as we made our way to the coffee shop.

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CHAPTER THREE

With a large black coffee in hand, I ushered Zoe to one of the window side tables. The coffee shop was empty at this hour, but would fill up once the bar crowd let out in an hour or so. I took a seat across from her, popping the lid off my cup and taking a sip of the scalding liquid inside.

She watched me from across the small tabletop, her eyes narrowed and lips pursed. *Yeah*, I thought. *I'd be wary of me, too.*

"So," she tucked a strand of auburn hair behind her ear and fixed her gaze on the table for a moment, brows creased in thought. "If that thing was what you call a minion, what does that make you?" Zoe met my gaze, chin lifted and eyes blazing. By the gods, she was brave. Facing down a minion not an hour ago, and there she sat across from me taking it all in as if it was just another Sudbury Saturday night. "I saw the way you moved out there. You, and that other guy—Noah. No one carries a sword like that; not in the 21st century, at least."

I took a sip of my coffee, letting the warm liquid complete a slow roll around the interior of my mouth before I swallowed. Did I dare tell her? I glanced at the glass behind her, Noah's broad back pressed against the bricks beside it as he kept guard over us. We'd each been warned by the gods: Tell no one of our nature, nor our origins. Guard the humans who worshiped them, and stay below the radar while doing so. Draw attention, and face a slow, agonizing death.

Mentally shrugging and flipping the bird in the faces of the gods, I made my decision. They'd made theirs by neglecting the deal and allowing the minion to attack Zoe. Hell on a stick—they let it happen right in front of him. If that's how the gods wanted to play it, he'd play their little game, and seize the opportunity. Carpe diem, buddy. Carpe diem.

"I'm a vampire."

Zoe scooted back in her chair, eyes wide and hands raised in a

defensive posture. “You’re a… a vampire?” she hissed, eyes scanning the shop behind me to ensure no one heard her.

“No, I just play one on T.V.” I snarked at her, leaning back in my seat. My fingers drummed once against the warm side of the coffee cup I held, tapping out a four fingered ‘Ha, how’d you like that one?’

She examined me from shit kickers to crown, and narrowed her eyes as they settled on a point just beneath my own. I smirked. Zoe wouldn’t meet my gaze. Interesting, and stereotypical. “Funny guy. So… Undead, allergic to garlic and the sun. All the usual lore?”

“No, Zoe.” I sighed and scrubbed a hand over my tired face. Fucking Hollywood and their idiotic tropes. Vampires lived, breathed and tanned the same as everyone else. Except zombies. I shuddered. Just… no. There wasn’t a soap invented yet that could cover the stench of a sun warmed zombie. The thought alone woke up my gag reflex and agitated the contents of my stomach. I swallowed and took a deep breath. “I’m not dead, but rather perpetually alive for the last two thousand years. Give or take a century, and the foreseeable future.” Tiny frown lines appeared between her eyebrows as she processed the information. I gave her a minute before continuing. “Garlic is my favorite food, and my tan?” I shot her a smirk followed by a wink. “There isn’t an inch of me that doesn’t have a sun-kissed Coppertone glow.”

Zoe gasped, her eyes involuntarily flicking up to meet mine. Yes! I gave a mental fist pump and widened my smile. “Well, hi. About time.” She lowered her gaze and I chuckled, reaching out to bump her chin with the tip of my right index finger. “You can look me in the eyes, Zoe. As cool as that would be, I don’t have the power to enthrall you. That’s another of those damnable myths perpetuated by books and movies.”

“But…” She hesitated, biting her lower lip. I brushed my thumb over the plump flesh, freeing it from her teeth. Gods, did the woman not know how tempting it was when she did that? If she kept it up my jeans would be perpetually snug in the crotch. That sexy little tick? Shit. I shifted in my seat, adjusting the fit of my pants to relieve some of the pressure. Zoe continued on, oblivious to what I had going on

beneath the tabletop. “How are you a vampire then?”

I buried my fingers in my hair, and took a deep breath. Did I give her the full truth, or a watered down version? I had a Jack Nicholson in A Few Good Men moment. *You can’t handle the truth!* I smirked and shook my head to clear the thought. Full truth. Lying, even by omission, came back to bite you in the ass eventually. “A schmuck who swore his allegiance to a bunch of sick as fuck gods and ended up with eternal life. Oh, and a wicked nasty need for blood.” I shrugged, extending my right hand across the table. “Immortal warrior. Defender of mankind. Otherwise known as Fallen. Or, if you’d prefer to use the name my parents gave me, Alexander Leka. Which, incidentally, means defender of mankind. Ironic. I know.”

“What the what?” Zoe spluttered, coughing to dislodge the coffee she’d been in the process of swallowing when I dropped the truth bomb in her lap. She ignored my hand, choosing instead to focus on my face. “Immortal warrior and defender of mankind? You’re joking, right?”

I dropped my hand back to the chipped tabletop and sighed. There it was. Tell the girl I’m a vampire and that pill goes down without a hiccup. But confess to immortality, with the task of defending the world, and that’s not believable. What the actual hell would happen when I dropped the rest of the twisted tale on her?

“Afraid not.” She cocked a well-kempt auburn brow at me and I shrugged. “I was young and in love. This was the price I volunteered to pay so that my beloved would continue to live. My life, for hers.”

Zoe reached out, her delicate hand coming to rest on top of my much larger one. She gave it a light squeeze. “You must have loved her very much to make such a huge sacrifice. I can’t imagine you knew what you were getting into when you did it though.”

“Not a damn clue,” I growled. Her eyes widened at my rough tone and I cursed the bitterness I felt toward the gods. She was alive, once more, and here. I should be grateful. And yet, I wasn’t. How could I be when the greatest love of my life was sitting across the table from me, and she had no clue who I was, who I’d been to her? “I’d do it again though. In a heartbeat. I love her that much.”

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He loves her that much. Interesting, I thought and took a cautious sip of my café mocha. The super-hot liquid scalded my tongue and I wrinkled my nose, pushing the cup aside. “You used the present tense there. Did you mean to?”

Fallen’s unique amber eyes flicked up to meet mine. I felt the impact like a ten-ton weight on my chest. “Yes, I did.” He lowered his gaze, freeing me from the intensity, and I released the breath I hadn’t realized I was holding. I tilted my head, silently asking ‘Why?’, and he responded with a small smile. “Because she’s alive. Reborn once per century as a test of my loyalty to the gods. I can resist the temptation she presents and continue on with my duty to them, or find her and lose her permanently. No more reincarnation. I would remain immortal, bound to the vows I took, without the comfort of knowing she lives on.”

“That’s… tragic.” There was more to the story, I could sense it, but decided to move on to another topic and press for the remaining details another time. Something else had been niggling me since the attack, and I needed an answer. “So… How is it that you know my name?” I pulled my cup over, fiddling with the lid. “I’m pretty sure we’ve never met before. I’d remember a guy like you.”

He shrugged, the fabric of his t-shirt stretching to accommodate the movement of the big, burly shoulder beneath it. Fallen avoided eye contact, choosing to study the lid of his coffee cup instead of looking at me. “It’s complicated.”

“That’s original.” I snorted and shook my head. “Try something else. Like, I don’t know, the truth.” He started to shake his head, but I reached across the table and placed my right hand on his left. “Come on. It can’t be worse than the other stuff you’ve thrown at me tonight. How much more farfetched than cursed immortals, mean-ass gods, and deadly minions can it get?”

Fallen snorted softly and lifted his gaze to meet mine. Amber collided with brown and I flinched; bleak, dull eyes stared back at me.

He looked away, coughing to clear his throat. His voice, when he finally spoke, was flat—monotone. “You’re her, Zoestrella Mesha. The woman I sacrificed everything for so that she could live.”

Oh. I sat back, my hand sliding off of his to rest against the cool tabletop. “That explains the dreams,” I muttered as I tried to absorb the truth bomb he’d dropped on me. I, or a previous incarnation, was responsible for the curse afflicting him. Did I really believe all of this? Even with the memory of the minion attack fresh in my mind, I couldn’t help but question the validity of what Fallen was asking me to believe.

“What dreams?” Fallen leaned forward, his big elbows framing the expanse of his chest between them. “Zoe?”

He snapped his fingers beneath my nose and I blinked, breaking from my inner musings. “What? Oh, the dreams. Yeah… those.” I brought my hands up, scrubbing them over my face as I tried to piece together what to tell him. The words wouldn’t come though. I was stuck on his claim that I was the woman he’d pined over for two thousand years. Out of everything Fallen had told me, this bit stuck and wouldn’t go down. “Me?” I cocked my head and met his gaze. “Really?”

“Yes, Zoe. Really.” He gave me a small, tight lipped smile. “Now, about these dreams?”

I help up my right hand, index finger signaling him to give me a moment. Fallen’s eyes narrowed, but he nodded. I knew I was testing the man’s patience with my stalling. Could he really blame me though? The bombs he’d dropped on me in the last hour would take a minute, or twenty, to digest. I brought my hands up, closing my eyes as I rubbed my temples with my fingertips and put my thoughts together. How much did he know? Were the details of each reincarnation the same, or similar? There were so many questions I needed him to answer.

Fallen coughed, clearly we’d reached the limit of his patience. Funny, considering he’d waited thousands of years for this moment. I lowered my hands, wrapped them around my cup and trained my gaze on the brown liquid inside. This was a story few people knew; one I

preferred not to tell. To my neighbors, I was the night owl in apartment 307 who watched Walking Dead at four in the morning. I was the pale skinned girl with dark red hair who never went out during the day. I was the loner, the ghost no one saw.

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CHAPTER FOUR

“They started when I was a little girl. I don’t remember the exact age, but I can’t think of a time when I didn’t see you in my dreams.” I took a sip of my drink, the chocolaty concoction coating my mouth. “You were a comforting presence in my life.” I paused to consider how best explain the previous statement without making my parents out to be villains, or my childhood unpleasant. “As a little girl, I was forced to stay indoors—a lot—because of a serious allergy. The sun is harmful to me, burns my skin and makes me super sick if I’m exposed to it for even a short period of time. We tried everything, saw all the doctors and specialists. Nothing worked. Nothing,” I paused and glanced out the window at the moon in the sky above us. A narrow haze surrounded the silvery orb, my nocturnal sun in a midnight sky. I shook my head, smirking at the poetic turn of my thoughts. “It makes for a solitary existence when you don’t have many friends to play with because they’re all busy eating dinner and doing homework when you’re waking up for the day. They’re all having baths and getting ready for bed when it’s your time to go out and play. So I stayed out of the sun, learned to live in the dark with my imaginary friend... the man with the amber eyes.”

Fallen reached out, his warm hand coming to rest on my forearm. He gave me a weak smile when I looked up from my cup, and I gave him the same in return. His lips parted, as though he was about to say something, and then promptly shut again.

“It’s okay.” I slid my arm from beneath his hand and shrugged. “How were you supposed to know that a decision you made two thousand years ago would affect the life of a girl who wasn’t even a glimmer in the universe yet?”

He flinched and glanced out the window. “Well, that’s just it. I did know, Zoe. Sort of.”

Oh, really? I cocked an eyebrow at him and waited for Fallen to

continue. He pulled his hand back across the table, bringing both up to scrub over his face. When he lowered them again, his amber eyes met my own brown ones.

"The original Zoe suffered from the same condition, but to a lesser degree." I blinked and sat back in the flimsy plastic chair. He gave me a moment to digest the news, and then continued. "I often wondered if any of her reincarnations would inherit the allergy as well."

I held up a hand, pausing his explanation. "Wait. You mean you don't know?"

"No." He sighed and gave me another small smile. "I've never come in contact with one—until now. For obvious reasons."

The coffee shop door opened to admit a group of late night partiers, and a blast of cool air swept through, ruffling my hair. I shivered and tugged Fallen's jacket tighter around me, thankful for the warmth and cover it provided. The t-shirt I'd been wearing earlier now resided in the bathroom trash bin, too blood stained to be considered salvageable. My jacket hadn't fared much better, nor the front portion of my bra. Which sucked, because it was one of my favorites, and bras weren't cheap. I kept the bra, my girls weren't small enough to go free willy and not be noticed, but the jacket joined my shirt in the trash. The minion's grip had pierced both carotids from what I could tell by the bloody trails left behind on my skin. Noah had healed the wounds —a fact I still couldn't wrap my head around—but the gory evidence remained on my unblemished skin.

I returned my attention to Fallen as the worm of curiosity won out over my deliberate attempt to not probe further. My reality bubble was stretched pretty far as it was already. Much more, and the thing might blow to smithereens. I couldn't help myself though and asked, "You weren't curious? Not even a little?"

"Oh, I was." He gave me a rueful smile. "There isn't a scale big enough to measure the level of curiosity I've managed to hold at bay about you, and all of the previous incarnations of you." He pushed the fingers of his right hand through his hair, ruffling the thick strands. "It was easier before the age of the internet, where anything and anyone is searchable. Until then, I could stick my head in the sand, go about

my business, and ignore the fact that you were out there somewhere, living your life without any memory of me." A soft chuckle escaped his lips. "They say ignorance is bliss. I say, fuck that noise. It's sheer, unadulterated, seventh ring of hell, torture. The woman I've loved for thousands of years was somewhere out in the world, and if I went looking for her, I'd kill her—permanently." He shook his head. "I wanted to find you more than I wanted my next breath. But, I also wanted you to live full and happy lives. So, I stayed away."

His mention of my permanent death brought back to mind the consequences Fallen had outlined earlier. I frowned and bit my lower lip for a moment. "But…" He lifted an eyebrow in question and I let out a shaky breath. "This is not me saying that I believe any of this, but… How am I still alive then? You found me, Fallen. We've been together for the better part of an hour, and I'm still breathing. Kinda makes the whole 'you find me and I die thing' look like a steaming pile of horse crap. Don't you think?"

"Call me Alex, please? And… I don't know."

A soft tap on the window behind me drew his gaze up from mine. Curious, I turned to look as well. Noah stood outside, his face barely visible beneath the lip of his ball cap, and those strange eyes glowed in the gloom. He executed a series of hand signals to which Alex emitted a series of curses that would make even the saltiest sailor blush. Alex made a gesture in return, one I recognized as meaning 'Come here', and fell silent while we waited for Noah to join us.

Another burst of early April air blasted inside as the big guy entered and made his way over to join us. He pulled a chair over, flipped it around and straddled the back as he leaned toward us. "I'm not sure if this is a problem, or a huge fucking blessing, but… the gods have disappeared."

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I stuck my fingers in my ears, gave them a good wiggle to make sure the channels were indeed clear, and faced Noah once more. "Come again?"

“They’re gone, bro.” He made a ‘poof-gone’ gesture with his hands. “No one’s heard from them in days. Pax tried summoning Mafael, but she’s not shown her face or sent any type of response whatsoever. Same for Shesmu. I’ve been trying to get his prickly ass down here since you guys sat down, and nada.” His phone pinged, and mine joined in a second later. Noah picked his up as I pulled mine out from a back pocket. I thumbed across the screen and a text from Lambert, one of our brethren, popped open. ‘Am-heh MIA. None of the gods responding to summons. Shit officially hitting fan.’

I tapped out a quick reply and hit send. ‘Aware. Zoe attacked by minion. Contact established. Still breathing.’ There was no need to explain who Zoe was to Lambert. With so few of us left, the six of us were familiar with each other’s curses. Some were worse than others. All were sacrifices we’d been willing to make at the time.

Zoe sat across the table, quietly sipping her café mocha. She’d tuned us out and hoped that she was working through everything thrown at her over the last hour. Her face was so expressive, and I was sure she didn’t realize just how much her thoughts broadcasted across her features. I’d been watching her, the flicker of doubt in her eyes with each revelation. She put on a brave face, but I saw beyond it to the uncertainty she tried to hide.

I let out a breath and scrubbed my hands through my hair. How would she react when I dropped the biggest bomb of all? Eyes closed, I blew out a long, slow breath and let my head hang forward. One step at a time, I reminded myself. She needed to believe the rest first, to see me as Alex and not Fallen, the vampire protecting a band of absentee, asshats who just happened to be gods.

No sweat. I let out a soft snort. I was so screwed.

Noah nudged my boot beneath the table and I glanced over at him. He cocked a brow, a silent query asking if I was okay. I nodded, rubbed my face and sat back, slouching in the chair.

“Has anyone reached out to Atum?” Noah nodded, popping the gum in his mouth as he flipped his baseball cap backward.

“He doesn’t have a clue where any of the kids have gone off to.” He scratched the stubble on the edge of his chin and gave the gum

another pop. “They’re all off the grid.”

A chill worked its way up my spine, my shoulders shuddering at the implications. “Even Am-heh?” Noah nodded and a cold pit of dread settled in my stomach. “Shit. If any of those bastards need to be kept on a leash it’s that sick fuck.” I let my head roll forward, chin resting on my chest. “As much as I hate to say it…”

“Then don’t,” Noah growled. “This is our chance to be happy, Fall. I, for one, am taking that chance and running like hell with it. Freedom has been a long time coming for me. You know that more than the others.”

He had a point, and I knew it. Appointed as my mentor at the time of my turning, Noah and I spent hundreds of years at each other’s sides. He was reassigned for a brief period, but when that ended we came back together and patrolled Northern Ontario together. Only recently had we settled in the Sudbury area after receiving reports of unusually high activity. The disappearance of nearly a dozen gods would certainly explain the rise in supernaturals in the area.

I glanced at Zoe, the night’s events starting to make sense. With Shesmu missing, those under his dominion had free reign to run amok, creating chaos all over North America in his absence. It also meant that those the gods had kept hidden from such creatures were no longer protected—as evidenced by the attack on Zoe.

Noah’s silvery blue eyes met my amber ones as I turned to look at him. He blew a pale pink bubble, snapped it and sucked the gum back into his mouth. I hated the habit, but he persisted no matter how many times I asked him not to snap the damn gum. He shrugged and I let out a sigh.

“We’re fucked.”

He nodded. “Yup. Hard, with no lube.”

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CHAPTER FIVE

My Saturday had started off so well. I'd slept in late, luxuriating in the cushy warmth of my king size bed until almost noon. Garlic's insistent nipping at my toes had finally pulled me out of bed. The beast was a pest when he wanted to be fed. I'd given him a bowl full of kibble and proceeded to put together my own feast—four eggs over easy, homefries doused in a liberal layer of Frank's Red Hot, thick buttered toast and, of course, a pound of crispy bacon. Because, bacon. Yeah. A pot of black coffee, and a tall glass of orange juice rounded things out. A bowl of Corn Flakes was not enough to fuel this machine. No sir.

Sunlight had streamed in through the kitchen curtains, Dallas Smith's album *Lifted* blasting from the stereo while I ate, cleaned up and changed into my running gear. With my Rowdy Country playlist pumping in my ears, I put feet to payment and headed out into the crisp afternoon for my daily fifteen kilometer run. Yeah, my body was forever locked in prime condition and health. That didn't mean I would let myself lay around all day and watch crap TV until it made me want to take out half of humanity in a what-the-fuck fueled rage. The run gave me time to clear my head and plan that night's patrol. Not that much changed when it came to that either. Noah and I had a routine for which areas to walk, and which night we hit each one. We didn't deviate it from it, much. Not until tonight anyway. Tonight the plan had been shot all to hell. Thank you, gods.

Zoe cleared her throat and I shifted my attention back to her. I'd been so focused on the gods' disappearance, and the possible repercussions, that I'd forgotten her for a moment. She wiggled her fingers at me, her right brow arched as if to say 'Hi, remember me?'. I gave her a sheepish smile and nodded.

"Sorry." I scratched the edge of my jaw, the right corner of my bottom lip caught between my teeth. "Just trying to think. We need

some sort of plan, and I'm drawing a big fat zero on what to do next."

Her lips parted as if she was going to say something but Noah's snort put a halt to it. We both shifted to look at him, and he let out a soft chuckle.

"Really?" He held his hands up, brushing the palms together in an 'I wash my hands of this' gesture. "Dude, the gods are gone. What do we do next? Are you kidding me? We break these damn curses and get the hell out of Dodge. That, my friend, is what we do."

Noah threw a pointed glance at Zoe and returned his attention to me. What he said made sense, I knew it was. But I also knew that Zoe was nowhere near ready to accept the things I'd told her already, never mind what I'd need to ask of her in order to break the curse. That would take some serious proving of things best not done sitting in a Tim Horton's.

"Wait," Zoe cut in, leaning forward and placing her elbows on the table. "You can break the curse?" She settled her beautiful brown eyes on me and I silently cursed Noah for his big mouth.

I nodded and caught Noah doing the same out of the corner of my eye.

Zoe pushed her fingers through her hair, the auburn locks tumbling back around her shoulders. I wanted desperately to lock my own fingers in the thick depths, hold her tight and plunder her mouth. Even after two thousand years I remembered the taste of her, and the sweetness of her kisses. Visions of us together had played on repeat in my memory for decades. I'd eventually forced them to the back of my mind, the constant reminder was too much to handle and focus on what was now required of me.

"It's… complicated."

She snorted. "You've used that one already." Pushing her cup aside, Zoe laid both hands flat on the table and leaned back in her chair. She tilted her head, assessing Noah and I. "Not that I believe any of this for a second—because, really… vampires, gods, reincarnation and curses? That's just a little farfetched and science-fictiony for me, thanks. For all I know, the guy who attacked me earlier was just some X-Men cosplayer on a bad trip, and I was in the wrong place at the

wrong time."

"Really?" Noah snorted, blond brows arching up toward the edge of his cap. "You did see the state of your clothes, right? The blood soaked into your shirt wasn't fake, Zoe. That minion damn near killed you. No bullshit."

Zoe shrugged, her expression one that said she still didn't believe him.

Noah growled, leaned closer and I heard the faint squelch as his fangs pushed through his gums. Her eyes grew wide as she watched the process. He was taking his sweet time, deliberately slowing the release for dramatic effect. Both upper fangs settled into place, gleaming under the fluorescents above us. He gave Zoe a second longer to gape and then snapped his teeth, biting at the air inches from her nose. "Believe now?"

"What the fuck, Noah?" I gave his right shoulder a shove, glaring at him. "Put those damn things away." He flicked his tongue over his teeth and the fangs disappeared. "Dick move. Seriously."

He shrugged, glancing at Zoe. "Maybe, but it worked. Didn't it, Zoe?"

I looked across the table and cursed beneath my breath. Zoe's eyes were wide, pale hands clutching the edge of the table. Her breaths came hard and fast, posture rigid as she shifted her gaze between the two of us. "I wanted her to believe, not scared out of her fucking mind, you idiot. Jesus Christ. You just made my job ten times harder."

"Nah, man. I did you a favor. You'll thank me for it later." He smirked and twisted his ball cap around, the bill shading his eyes once more as Noah rose from his seat. Touching two fingertips to his right temple, he saluted me and winked at Zoe. Cocky bastard. I waved him off and returned my focus to the woman across from me.

Zoe stared at me, brown eyes still wide between slow blinks. "You're a… a vampire?"

"Yes, Zoe." I held back a sigh at the sense of déjà vu. "I'm a vampire, and everything I told you was true. There's more, but this isn't the place to discuss it and I don't think you're quite ready yet either."

“Show me.” She sat forward, eyes trained on my mouth, and reached out. Her fingertips brushed my bottom lip, pushing it down. I jerked back, cutting off a growl before it had time to start. “Let me see, and then I’ll believe you.”

Against my better judgment, I moved closer and peeled my upper lip back. Both sets of fangs slipped into place with a wet click and tingle in my gums. I lifted a brow and cocked my head, pulling back when she reached out to touch the left set.

“No,” I grumbled and retracted the extra teeth. “That’s a really, really bad idea. No touchy the fangs.” I left the ‘yet’ part out. What she didn’t know wouldn’t hurt her. There’d be time for that story when I got her to a more private location. With that in mind, I rose from my seat and offered her my hand.

Zoe placed her right hand in mine and scooted out of her chair. I looked down at her, the tip of her nose barely reaching the middle of my chest—a good foot in height separated us. My jacket dwarfed her and made Zoe look like a little girl wearing her daddy’s clothes. Zoe, however, was no little girl. She was all woman beneath the heavy leather covering her skin. I released her hand, guiding with a palm on her lower back as I tried desperately to shake off the train of thought I was on.

“Where are we going?” She glanced up at me as we exited the coffee shop. Cold wind blustered around us, cutting through my shirt. I’d deal with it though if it meant she was warm inside my jacket.

Turned back in the direction we’d come from earlier, I gave her a little nudge to keep us moving forward. “My truck’s parked a little way down. I’m taking you to the safest place I know—my house.” She jerked but my firm push on her back kept Zoe’s feet in motion. We didn’t have time to debate the destination. We just needed to get there. “You’re not protected anymore, Zoe. If that minion was able to locate you, there are any number of other things—more powerful things—that can, and will, find you. What he did? That was nothing compared to what some of these creatures would do to you given half the chance.”

“Okay, okay.” She picked up the pace, pulling the jacket tighter

around her petite frame. “I get it. But what’s to stop them from coming to your place and doing that anyway?”

I held up my right hand, the shadow of my sword glimmering beneath a streetlight as we walked under it. Her eyes widened, throat working as she swallowed. “That, Zoe. Now, come on. The truck is in the next alley. Once we get to my place I’ll answer your questions.” I released the sword from its partial manifestation and shoved my hand back into my jeans pocket. “There’s something I want to show you, too.”

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CHAPTER SIX

Garlic greeted us at the door, twisting himself around between my feet before making his way over to sniff at Zoe. She bent, hand extended for the cat to sniff but, ornery thing that he was, Garlic turned tail and walked away. I turned toward the hall off the living room and pointed at the couch.

"Sit. I'll be back in a sec with a clean shirt for you." She moved to the couch and the cat hopped up on the other cushion, eyeing her warily from his perch. "Garlic will warm up to you in a minute. Just ignore him."

Zoe snorted and a grin spread over my lips as I walked away. "You named your cat Garlic? Poor kitty." Her voice dropped off to a murmur, whatever she was saying not meant for my ears.

I grabbed a hoodie from one of the dresser drawers and turned toward the closet across the room. Did I really want to do this? Was this particular can of works one I could open? Better yet… Would the gods allow it? Yeah, the crazy shits were missing in action, but that didn't mean they wouldn't pop out of the woodwork like the fucking parasites they are if I tapped this particular genie's bottle.

Hangers rattled on the bar as I shoved clothes aside to reveal the small safe tucked into the wall. A soft beep confirmed I'd entered the combination correctly and the door clicked as the latch released. I stood frozen for a moment, further debating the wisdom of what I planned to do next. This was crazy. This was never going to work. This was… everything I'd wanted over the last two thousand years.

Noah's words, spoken long ago, came back to me. I'd taken one golden torque from my neck, the one which proclaimed to anyone who saw it that I was married, and produced another from my pocket. The wide bands carried my name with Zoe's, and were inscribed with my family's motto 'Protect and Defend'. Noah had stopped me from throwing the trinkets into the ocean. "Don't. Those, my friend, are

something you want to hang onto and protect with your life. You may need them one day. There's more power in those twists of gold than you realize, and when the day comes, you'll understand just how much."

I understood now what he'd been trying to tell me. The sly bastard. I pulled the torques from the safe, my heart skipping a beat as light flashed off the smooth gold surfaces. The day Zoe had presented me with these, slipping one around my neck as she stared in my eyes, had been the happiest of my life. I'd place the matching one around the slender column of her throat and proclaimed my eternal love. The celebration of our union had gone on until the early hours of the morning, the entire village joining in revelry as the Lord's son married the prettiest girl in the district.

A soft knock pulled me out of the memory. I turned, a golden torque in each hand, and faced Zoe. "You were gone so long I thought maybe you'd gotten lost." She gave me a small smile. "What are those? They're pretty."

The words stuck when I opened my mouth to answer. I cleared my throat and tried again. "They're our wedding bands, sort of. Back then, we wore torques to symbolize marriage."

"Those…?" Zoe entered the room, her strides purposeful as she crossed to where I stood just outside the closet. She held out her right hand, a silent demand to see the jewelry. I hesitated a moment and then placed the smaller one, hers, into her palm. She held it up to the light, reading the inscription out loud. Her finger traced the infinity symbol etched between our names and she looked at me.

"Yeah," I shrugged and gave her a tight lipped smile. "I didn't know when I had those made that it really would be infinity. Well, two thousand years' worth of it anyway."

She smiled back and glanced at the mirror above my dresser. "May I?"

I waved her over. The torque was hers. Who was I to say no if she wanted to try it on? In my secret heart of hearts, the one I'd kept smashed down in the bottom of my soul, I wanted to see it on her again. Needed to see it.

Zoe moved in front of the glass, pushing her hair behind her shoulders and slipped the torque around her neck. She smiled at me in the mirror as the heavy metal settled against her delicate collarbones. My heart lurched in my chest at the sight of her, and of the jewelry sitting once again where it belonged.

"It's beautifu…" Her eyes widened and then rolled back in her head as she collapsed to the carpet. I raced across the room, arriving just in time to keep Zoe's head from hitting the floor. She twitched in my arms, her eyeballs moving rapidly beneath the lids. What the ever-loving fuck?

Lifting Zoe, I settled her against my chest and carried her over to the bed. She lay still against the fluffy blue duvet, her chest rising and falling so fast I feared she would hyperventilate. "Come back to me, Zoe." I muttered the same thing over and over as the minutes ticked by and she remained unconscious. "Please. Please let this work."

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Voices, sounds and images rushed at me the moment I slipped the torque around my neck. I looked in the mirror, Alex's gaze clashing with mine seconds before everything went black. I'd seen the fear in his amber eyes in that brief moment.

The next thing I knew, a much different looking Alex stood in front of me. Golden clips were interspersed through his long black curls, securing it behind his shoulders, and a pristine white tunic draped over his chest. Love shone from his completely normal, but beautiful, brown eyes. He bent at the waist, a smile on his lips as I felt myself reach up, place something around his neck and then caress his smooth left cheek. When he straightened again I saw that he wore the matching torque to the one I'd put on.

Cheers full of blessings and congratulations rang out around us. I'd never heard the language before, but instinctively recognized it as Ancient Macedonian. The Alex from that time cupped my face, his lips brushing mine. I closed my eyes and opened for him, our tongues brushing against each other in a slow, sweet kiss. This man… Oh, how

he loved me.

My eyes opened again to find a different Alex leaning over me, his face etched with tears and spattered with blood. His bloodstained fingers brushed over my face, stroking the hair from my brow as I gasped for breath. I coughed and more blood spattered his handsome face. It occurred to me then—this was my death. The very first, and the one that pushed Alexander to the lengths he'd taken to sacrifice his life for mine. A warm tear splashed my cheek, our eyes meeting as my heart stuttered. "Don't leave me, мојата сакана еден." I knew the words meant 'my beloved one' and my soul wept for him as I felt the life begin to fade from the original me. I knew now—this wasn't the end for me; but, watching the sorrow on Alex's face as he pleaded and bargained for my life broke my heart.

Life after life flashed by—one for each century following the first. After Alex's deal with the gods to save me, I'd woken up to discover my husband gone and our baby growing in my belly. A child Alex had no knowledge of when he'd disappeared in service of the gods. The daughter who would grow up to be the grandmother of my next reincarnation—a pattern which would follow for the next two thousand years, every Mesha woman naming her first born daughter Zoe in honor of the original woman who had lost her husband. None of them knew how Alexander had supposedly died. I'd passed it off as a sudden sickness that took him swiftly while we were away on holiday; his body burned to prevent further spread of the illness. Our love, and tragic ending, was the stuff of legend through generation after generation of the Mesha family.

The last image faded, my mother's face as she held me for the first time, and a soft feminine voice whispered, "Zoe, wake up." Darkness enveloped me and I relaxed into it, certain of what I needed to do when I woke up.

My eyes fluttered open sometime later, my cheek resting against a hard chest. His heart thumped beneath my ear and his fingers traced slow, familiar patterns down the length of my spine. Alexander and I had spent many nights snuggled like this during our brief marriage. I let out a breath, turned my face toward Alex's chest and hummed

softly. He stopped stroking my back and shifted beneath me.

“You still smell the same.” Alex rolled until I lay on my back. His handsome face hovered above mine, hope shining in his eyes. I smiled as I reached up and tangled my fingers through the thick curls of his hair. “But, I wonder… do you kiss the same, мојата сакана еден?”

He grinned and leaned in, lips brushing mine as he’d done in the vision of our wedding. I smiled against his lips and opened, sweeping my tongue out to meet his in a kiss that was two thousand years in the making.

A solid weight thumped against my side, pulling my focus from the warm mouth and soft lips pressed to mine. I reached down, my fingers wrapping around cool metal. The other torque, I realized. Alex’s wedding band. I picked it up, bringing the gold band up between us. Our eyes met and I smiled, recalling the final moments of my trip through memory lane.

Alexander tensed, his muscles rigid where they touched mine. His brows furrowed as he glanced at the torque, and then at me. I reached up, running the fingers of my left hand through his hair.

“Do you want to be free, Alex?” He pulled back as if I’d slapped him, eyes narrowed. I twirled the torque between my fingers and smiled. “It can be done. Right now. All you have to do… is put this on, and repeat our wedding pledge.”

He closed his eyes and inhaled a deep breath. “It can’t be that easy, Zoe.” Alex re-opened his eyes, amber colliding with my brown, and shook his head. “The gods wouldn’t make it that easy.”

“What part of any of this has been easy, my love?” I laughed softly and held the torque up, the ends caressing the back of his neck. “Two thousand years apart, unable to seek me out or make contact, was easy? Missing out on our daughter’s life, our grandchildren’s, was easy?” I leaned up and kissed him, a gentle brush of my lips against his. “Take what is yours, Alexander. To hell with the gods and their curse. What more can they take from you, from us? Lean back. Slide the torque around your neck, repeat our vow, and break free of them.”

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Could it really be this easy? I closed my eyes, focused on where the ends of the torque pressed on the back of my neck, and recalled the promise we'd made to each other on our wedding day. The ceremony held no vows, per se, but Zoe and I had opted to make a promise to each other anyway.

Eyes opened, I bent and pressed a soft kiss to her lips. "One mind. One body. One love. Forever." I murmured the words and pushed back. The torque slid around my neck, it's heavy ends resting on my collarbones, and sealed the commitment.

"One mind," Zoe repeated. "One body. One love. Forever."

Searing pain blasted through every nerve ending I possessed. I had the wherewithal to roll off of Zoe before my muscles seized. Body bowed, I gritted my teeth to keep from releasing the scream built up in the back of my throat. A solitary thought wormed its way through the agony of my imploding consciousness—relief. I recognized this pain, welcomed it with open arms as I had the first time it tore through my body and bound my soul to the gods. Except this time, I was breaking the bond and setting myself free. Free of their malicious demands. Free of their childish behavior. Free of a solitary life without the other half of my broken soul.

Zoe's voice echoed through the haze of agony, a soothing balm against the tidal wave of pain. "Breathe, Alex. Breathe, and come back to me."

I wanted to, but the curse would have its final say and keep me locked in torment until its grasp loosened and I was set free. Through it all, however long I lay there, Zoe remained at my side. Her presence and gentle touch soothed my mind. She was my beacon in the darkness. My love. My life. My savior.

The curse pushed another wave of pain through me, a final twist of the knife in my soul. Darkness encroached, and I let it take me as I felt

my last ties to the gods release their hold. I felt my lips curl into a smile and flipped a mental bird to the gods as I surrendered to unconsciousness. Hasta la vista, motherfuckers.

***

"Welcome back, handsome."

I opened my eyes and blinked to bring Zoe face into focus. She leaned over me, her auburn curls pooled on my chest and a wide smile on her lips. Sunlight shone against her skin and made her hair shimmer like a fiery halo around her head. I was forgetting something about Zoe and sunlight, but couldn't think of what as I took in the ethereal beauty of her in the golden light.

"Fuck." I shot up, pulling her beneath me to shield her from the harmful rays as the memory of her allergy rushed back. "What the hell, Zoe? You can't be sitting in the sun. Are you nuts?"

Laughter bubbled up from where she lay crushed under my chest. I frowned and pulled back to look at her. She grinned and held up a bare arm, free of blemishes, into the stream of sunlight above my left shoulder. "It's fine, Alex. The allergy seems to have been part of the curse. I've been sitting here enjoying the sun for the last hour while you were in la-la land."

My right back pocket chose that moment to vibrate and I jumped. Zoe chuckled and brought her arm back down. "That thing has been going off like crazy since you passed out. Might want to check it."

I sighed, rested my forehead against hers for a moment and pressed a kiss to the tip of her adorably upturned nose. "Whoever it is can wait. I've waited way too long to have you back in my arms. Five minutes won't kill them."

"Alex… I'm not going anywhere." She brushed her fingertips over my temples and gave my earlobes a gentle tug the way she had so long ago. I'd forgotten how much I loved the little gesture. "And they've been messaging or calling non-stop so I'd say it's a sure bet there's something urgent that needs your attention."

A series of curses slipped from my lips as I pulled the phone free of

my pocket and rolled to my back. Half a dozen calls each from the other five warriors, and double the amount of text messages, waited in my inbox. Shit. I opened the last message from Noah and scanned the barrage of texts.

Dude?

What the fuck?

Fall? Did you do it?

Oh, man. You did. Congrats.

Fucktarts! Houston, we have a problem… A big, motherfucking, apocalyptic problem… of the Ra variety.

My heart skipped a beat at the mention of Ra. Bad things happened when The Eye got involved. Really, really bad things. Violent, bloody things. Fantastic.

I sent Noah a text instructing him to gather the others and regroup at my house, then turned my attention to Zoe, my heart sinking as the smile slipped from her face. Whatever my expression held, she knew it was bad. “What is it?”

“Hell.” I let out a long breath and blinked slowly. “Hell’s been let out for recess, and she’s coming for us. All of us.”

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Cursed

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Go Back

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Evelina: From Blood to Dust by Xandra James

A vampire assassin shouldn't fall in love. So when I did, I knew it couldn't last. I walked away and didn't look back...until the man I loved was threatened by those I trusted. It was down to me to save him and I wouldn't fail. I'd stayed alive for eighty years, but matters of the heart were definitely harder than taking a life.

My name is Evelina and Dr Benedict Hamilton is my addiction. He's also the reason I'm going to die.

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Evelina: From Blood to Dust
by Xandra James

PROLOGUE

My name is Evelina and I drink blood. Not by choice, it is a necessity. I was turned in 1937. Germany was my home as a human. Vampires were everywhere in those days. And they took advantage of those fighting on both sides of the war. They made what we now call the second world war a bit of a blood bath. Humans were easy pickings back then. Still are now to be honest. Rules now, though. So many rules for us 'creatures of the night'. Anyone would think we're psychotic killers. We are.

I escaped from Germany into the United Kingdom when there was nothing else to keep me in the mother country. Although the hunters were becoming popular in Europe, in the United Kingdom, with enough money, it was easy to hide in plain sight. It's the same in modern times, only people think it's cool to be a blood-sucking freak now.

It's not, believe me. If there were a glory period, where those in the know celebrated my kind, it’s long gone. But it *was* fun once. It's hard to remember now. I'm getting old—not physically but my mind is tired— I embrace my death on a daily basis. In fact, I want to die. It's exactly why I do what I do every day in the hope that someone, somewhere, will be able to kill me. I won't make it easy for them, of course. When it's my time, it's my time. Problem is finding that somebody who can do it. Call it my quest in life. Is that sad? Probably.

I was just twenty-four when I was bitten. Yeah, that's usually how it happens. Hollywood got some of the lore right, at least. There are plenty of bloodsuckers in *that* industry. Sunlight doesn't burn us. Garlic won’t keep us away—unless you stink of it and then all bets are off. A stake would probably do us in—if it's tipped with silver. Yeah,

silver. That's a good one to kill us vampires with, but only if you can break skin and it touches their blood. Then there's probably a matter of a minute or so before it frazzles you inside out.

I do wear a silver pendant around my neck at all times. It burns my skin, but the pain makes me feel alive. It's about the only thing that does, nowadays, ever since I walked away from Ben. As they say, if you wake up and you have no aches and pains, you're probably dead and in the dirt.

What was I saying? Oh yeah, I was only twenty-four when it happened. I was happy then. I had a husband and children. Working hard for a nice home was top of my priorities. Then, shit happened.

Edward—my then husband—died at the hands of my attacker as he tried to stop them from hurting me. He was a beautiful man in every way. A rare good heart in a spiteful world. I miss his love almost as much as I miss my babies.

My small children, Freddie and Elizabeth—twins—were taken from me while I was recovering from the turn. Yeah, humans do completely die when they're bitten. You can't survive the toxicity running through your veins. It takes months of sleep in a secure place to be able to function again as a human. The bastard who turned me—my birther—kept me safe until the three months were over then disappeared. It was too late to stop him from taking my babies. There was no trace of them after I was awake enough to chase them. Regardless, I spent years trying to find them.

What am I now? I'm a dead woman walking and have been for almost eighty years. Times change, but what I am doesn't. I am a killer, a paid assassin of vampires and humans alike. Yeah, it's a bit ironic that I should be killing my own species. Still, there are some who are complete assholes just begging to be culled. That goes for humans, too. I'm not prejudiced in who I hate. Orders are orders. Who am I to argue? There are too many vampires in this world now anyway. For every ten people, one of those will be thinking about his next sanguineous feast. Not that the general public is allowed to know that. That's why vamps like me are around. I don't have family or friends anymore. I have nothing. This life is why I walked away from

Ben. He was my light in this dark world, but I couldn't risk him getting involved in my life. It's dangerous to be me. And I might be a bitch, but I couldn't let that happen.

They call me ruthless. And that's probably how I've stayed alive all this time. The average age of a vampire is just fifty years. There're too many risks in this world for someone like me, but I'm the exception to the rule. Maybe I need to chill out in my old age and appreciate the finer things in life. I think it's too late for that. If there's a Hell, I'll bring the cookies because you can bet your ass they have a place waiting for me already.

My name's Evelina and I'm a vampire assassin for the V13—an unofficial British government agency. If you're a bad person, you better watch out. I'll be in the shadows, waiting. And I'll have no hesitation in killing you, then buying a caramel latte to drink on the way home.

This is how I died...the second time. All because I'd fallen in love.

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CHAPTER ONE

The moonlight illuminates my lover’s body as he lies next to me in the bed. The whole room has an eerie glow about it. I watch the shadows growing and shrinking around me. My mind is on other things.

The cigarette I'd taken a puff of is burning itself out in the ashtray I wasn't addicted to nicotine, anyway. There are better things to be addicted to.

Benedict Hamilton stirs beside me and I watch the gentle thump, thump, thump of his pulse. He's been sleeping in his bed, in his house, for almost an hour now. And I'd watched him for most of that time.

He is perfect in every way. From the slight smattering of dark hair on his chest, to the shoulder muscles I like to nibble on. Oh, and he is still wearing the glasses which make him look like a delectable nerd.

I wanted this to be perfect so badly but it couldn't be. I couldn't offer him anything more than sex.

"Hey," his sleep ruffled voice pinched into my thoughts and I smiled at him, leaning in close to give him a kiss on that muscly bicep of his. "I thought you were trying to sleep?"

"I'm too excited to be here with you." The lie tripped off my tongue easily enough as they always did. Difference was with his man I wanted to tell the truth. I wanted him to know the real me, not the fake me that society dictated.

"Want to mess around again before I need to get to the hospital?" Ben reached out, pulling me closer so our naked bodies were touching all the way from shoulder to feet.

He felt good. Too good for me. I didn't deserve him. This would have to stop, there was too much of a risk. "Try and stop me." I trailed kisses down his neck, more aware than ever before that his blood flowed evenly through his veins right below my teeth. As much as I wanted to taste his blood, my fangs itching to pop and drink from

him, I couldn't show him the monster I really was.

Ben's strong arms enveloped me and I breathed deeply, trying to remember everything about him as I always did. We'd been on dozens of dates over the course of three months. All discreet, of course. For me at least, this relationship had reached the point of no return.

I didn't date for this very reason. My years on this earth had taught me that happiness doesn't strike twice in one life-time. And this man was definitely a lightning strike from the heavens. He was everything I wanted but couldn't have.

"What time does your shift start?" Ben's looked over his right shoulder to the small alarm clock.

"I have twenty minutes before I have to leave." He turned back to me. "I wish I hadn't said I'd cover for Melissa today. I want to spend more time with you." He kissed me gently on the jaw. My eyes closed, momentarily allowing me to forget who I really was. "I know you said you were busy later, but I really want to see you. I can't seem to get enough of you."

He tried to kiss me on the lips, but I moved my head as I always did. I wouldn't let him taste me, to fall victim to my vampire wares. What he was feeling was for me now was real. If he drank from the drug running through my body, he wouldn't be himself anymore. They said your one true love will in life won't fall victim to the drug. That was great, but there was no such thing as true love. Years of living in this world had told me that.

Ben's beautiful green eyes sparkled in the dim light. "I know you're having trouble trusting me, but I'm in this for the long term. One day you will kiss me. And I'm not a horrible kisser, I'm rather good if I do say so myself." He smiled and I couldn't help but reciprocate.

"We're running out of time, Mr Hamilton." I said as a way of changing the subject. He was too nice, too sweet to deserve something like me. It needed to end. This had to be the last time. He was my drug and I was addicted.

Ben spun me over, lying on top of me. My breasts jiggled and he automatically cupped one, bringing his mouth down to take a nipple between his teeth.

"Don't worry; I can get straight to the point." Ben laughed gently, as his tongue licked an erotic path over my breast then back up to my hardened nip, grasping it firmly with his teeth. My back arched as ripples begun to enslave my body and send me on a perilous journey to satisfaction.

Leaning over to his bedside cabinet, he pulled out the last condom in a packet of twelve and ripped the foil with his teeth. Without looking at what he was doing, he braced himself against the bed and rolled the rubber down his cock.

If he'd have known my womb was about as ripe as a rock and there was no need for birth control, maybe he'd have hurried the fuck up and pushed inside me. But I've never told him that and I had no intention of doing so. Call it ego, call it self-preservation, I couldn't risk him looking at me in disgust.

He moved then, nudging my legs apart so he could slip in between. I was more than ready to feel him inside me. His dick nudged the wet folds of my vagina, and I curled my legs around his waist pulling him closer to me. It was one of my favourite positions. I could watch the tiny nuances of his face, the way he concentrated and bit his lip.

"I wish I didn't have to go to work so I could make love to you slowly," he said moving from my breasts and kissing my throat. "You're so beautiful. I can't get enough of you. I won't ever get enough of you."

My breath caught. Not at his dick slipping inside and filling me completely, but at the words he was whispering in my ear. Screwing up my eyes so he didn't see my warring emotions, I nibbled on his ear lobe—one of his orgasmic points—and he shuddered deep inside me as his hips thrust slowly in and out.

Ben reached in between my legs and flicked gently against my arousal. The small movement had me wriggling underneath him, urging his cock to push harder and deeper to bring me my orgasm.

I'd had a lot of bed partners over the years. Sex had been a bargaining chip, a surrender, a victory, a pleasure and a chore. Right now, it was the most beautiful thing I'd ever experienced. Only with him, though.

And this would be the last time with this man. I could no longer risk it.

Silent tears made it through my closed eyes as the rhythm of our pleasure hit a crescendo and I tightened, slipping quickly into oblivion and taking Ben down with me into bliss.

My addiction had become dangerous. For both of us. He couldn't be associated with me. I was no good, a creature of the night, an abomination of life. And he was everything. There was no comparison. I had to disappear from his life.

And it was going to be the hardest thing I'd ever done.

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CHAPTER TWO

The night was cold—I could feel it right through my bones. The only heat in my body was from the silver of the pendant around my neck. A cat hissed somewhere close by, startling me. If I had a beating heart, it would have missed a beat. Instead, I breathed in the rancid smells of the alley where I stood, hovering, outside of the nightclub in the dark streets of London. Using calming techniques I'd learned long ago, it didn't take long to settle once more. It was somewhere around 3:00 a.m., but sleep was as far from me as you could get. Night-time was when I came out to play.

A sound at the rear exit had me shuffling back into the shadows. A girl exited the club, phone to her ear, giggling loudly. I cracked my neck, thankful she was walking away from me so I didn't have to hear the annoying cackle for longer than absolutely necessary.

Waiting until I was alone again, I stepped out into the dimly lit alley and glanced up the building to the second floor. The office light was now on, and that meant that the owner—Si Channing—was tallying the books for the evening. The giggling twit had been the last of his employees to leave, but she was also his regular shag.

A pang of regret hit me straight between the eyes. A regular shag hadn't been on my agenda since Ben. It hurt like a motherfucker to think I would never touch him again, never laugh with him over his ridiculously cheesy jokes. I blinked slowly, not quite able to disrupt the toxic thoughts of a love lost. Vampires don't get broken hearts, I chanted under my breath. At least when they did not have one to break.

Work. I needed to focus on something tangible.

Si Channing. As soon as they were done fucking, he'd go back to work. He was a workaholic and a creature of habit.

And that meant it was my time to enter the building.

As part of the package from my employer, I'd receive any pertinent

information about the target and any paraphernalia I would need to complete the job. This time they'd included the keys to get into the club.

They were heavy in the pocket of my leather jacket, but I was prepared, which is always a good thing in my line of work. It was the things I couldn't prepare for that might bite me in the arse. And I'd had a few of those over the years.

Looking around to make sure I was still alone, I stepped up to the doors and let myself in. I noticed all the main lights were still on, as I walked up the short corridor, which led to the back of the bar and the set of stairs up to the employees' kitchen etc.

My heeled, knee-high boots made a soft click-clack on the wooden floor. Movement set off the motion-sensor camera above me, but I kept on walking. I didn't show up on cameras, anyway. Something to do with how digital film was processed. Back in the olden days, it was a different matter. You had to have your wits about you back then. Things were too easy now. And that's why there were too many stupid vampires nowadays.

I jogged up the stairs, keeping my steps light, and headed straight for the main office. The upstairs hallway was dark. A single shred of light erupted from underneath the door, leading to my mark.

Si Channing had messed with the wrong people. Apparently. I had no idea of what he'd done. Maybe I was mindless for following orders, but I did like the natural chain of life-choice. Wasn't that what human nature had been doing since forever? I just helped out a little. And it was a good job. It suited my lifestyle down to the ground. Death was easy.

People are scared of the mafia, but they shouldn't be. The real crooks work for the government. Mess with a skinny, pale bureaucrat, and kiss your arse goodbye.

Twisting the heavy doorknob, I allowed the door to swing fully open giving me complete visual access to the room. Si was sitting at his desk, a mug of something steamy half way up to his open mouth. The shock was evident on his face as he slowly lowered the ceramic to the desk.

"Can I help you?" I could see the pulse in his neck jumping around like a flea on acid. He knew why I was here. They always did.

"I've come to kill you, Mr Channing." I always believed in getting straight to the point. Life was too long to fuck around on pleasantries.

All at once he was pushing back his chair, making it scrape across the wooden floor, I winced at the abusive noise, but there was no time to focus on it. Si was running at me. He probably figured I'd go down easy. He was about to get schooled.

Bracing myself for impact, I stood my ground as he charged, a manic look etched on his face. I never moved a muscle until he was close enough for me to smell his coffee breath. In an instant, I shifted myself out of his way, grabbed a hold of his lapels, and careened him into the doorjamb. His skull hit with a clunk and he crumpled onto the floor, not fully conscious.

"Wha—what have I done to you? I don't—I don't know you." I stepped away from him, straightening my jacket and pushing my red fringe out of my eyes.

"This is nothing personal, Mr Channing. I'm just doing my job. And my job is to kill you." Si started to cry. Large snotty drips falling down his face. It didn't matter whether they were young or old, small or big. Your own unexpected death made even the most stoic of men crumble in one way or another. It was usually tears, but rage and disbelief figured high, too.

I pulled back my jacket, exposing the reinforced compartment in the material which held my dagger. Pulling it out, I stepped toward the prone Si Channing, his eyes as big as saucers as he stared between me and my weapon.

I didn't blame him; it was a pretty dagger. Ruby encrusted hilt and a Venetian steel and silver blade. It was the bollocks, if I did say so myself. And I definitely didn't want to be stabbed with it.

"I'll give you anything. Anything if you let me go." Nothing tempted me in this life, and the subtle shake of my head was enough to quieten him for a moment or two.

"You can fight this, or it can be over quickly. It's your choice." The words were soft and I could see him contemplating his options. Should

he fight? Should he go easily? It was a tough final decision to make.

Emotions rushed across his face as I watched. I'd been at this far too long to not be prepared for every eventuality. And by the looks of him, his decision was made and it wasn't good. For him.

I sighed and cracked the knuckles on my left hand. I could do with the exercise anyway. I'd eaten my weight in donuts earlier.

Si pounced pretty quickly for a stocky guy, but I easily spun out from his grabby hands. Rage poured out of him as he let off a battle cry heard from a marauding Viking.

Spinning quickly, I caught him squarely in the midriff with a kick and moved behind him as he doubled over. Still he swiped at me with his fists, attempting—and failing—to keep me away. At one point, he caught me square in the mouth with a rogue elbow and split my top lip. I grinned as a trickle of blood blended with my pillar-box red lipstick and my tongue swept out to capture the nectar. Sweetness filled my mouth and spurred me on to finish the job.

Sprawling over him, I grabbed a handful of hair as my legs wrapped securely around his waist. The glint of my dagger under the artificial light had him whimpering and the floodgates opened in earnest.

"You're Evelina, aren't you? I swear I didn't know who he was. I was paid to get the information. And I won't tell anyone about any of it. I have money. It's yours. I'll leave the country. I swear. Please, don't kill me." My blade hesitated over his throat. I wondered who 'He' was, but it was of little consequence when I had orders. And I wasn't completely surprised he knew my name. What I do gets around.

The jugular pulsed as blood rushed around his body. I leaned in closer to Si's ear, my lips a soft caress on his skin.

"It's not my decision." The slice across the throat was quick and deep. Blood squirted out as his heart kept pumping. Si gurgled and his hands came up to his throat to stem the blood-loss. It was futile. I unwrapped my legs and slipped gently to the floor.

Blood soaked my dagger and hand; after about a minute, I gently let go of his hair and lowered him to the red-soaked carpet. He was gone.

It was surely a waste of good blood. It was one of the few rules I always stuck to: never drink from an assignment. There were plenty of willing—and yes, unwilling—humans and vampires to hit up for a taste. And that's exactly what I would be doing shortly. Right after I washed his blood off my hands. Physically, of course. Metaphorically I was fucked.

I went towards the small en-suite bathroom, passing his desk on the way. The mug of something hot was still steaming, his laptop was showing a holiday destination in Greece and wads of cash sat neatly on today's newspapers. It wasn't any of these things which caused me to slow, though.

A single piece of paper sat on the desk in front of his mobile phone. Badly scrawled handwriting had caught my attention. And a name. Benedict Hamilton. Ben... Immediate anger had me reaching for the document, not caring if my bloody hands smeared across the white.

His name, the address of the hospital he worked at and a time. That was it. I turned it over, hoping for more, but it was blank. Turning toward the dead body behind me, I wished I'd have listened to his squawking at the end.

"Fuck." I pushed at the mound of paperwork stacked neatly on the corner of the desk. It shot across the room before falling in a flutter to the carpet. My throat dried and I glanced down at the paper again.

Benedict Hamilton - St John De Myrtle hospital. Thursday 3:00 p.m.

I thought I'd stepped away in time. No one should know about any of this. I'd been so careful. Nothing should have been able to trace me to him.

Ben had been oblivious to my other life, despite me coming close to showing him the real me. He thought I was the quirky Evey. Not the killer Evelina.

This was exactly why I didn't make personal relationships. Things could so easily go wrong. It was better that I was a loner. I needed to remember that the next time I was lonely and horny.

"Benedict Hamilton what have I done?" I hadn't allowed myself to

say his name or think about him too much since I'd left him months before. The only time I welcomed my fantasies to come to life was when I slept. No one could touch them, there.

He was my fantasy. Always would be. Oh, but he was so good and I was so bad. And it was obvious my obsession with him was going to get him killed. There was no other explanation as to why his name was on the desk at this fucking idiot's nightclub.

In the folder I received, it had mentioned he was a snitch. I'd dismissed it, as I do ninety-five percent of what I read in these reports. I scrambled through the rest of the stuff on his desk and in his drawers. I knew I wouldn't find anything, but I couldn't let it go. I needed more information. Minutes passed and I reluctantly moved away and headed to the small bathroom. I needed to clean up and get out of here.

Five minutes later, I left the premises, hesitating at the door before making my way back down the alley. I pulled out my phone, dialling numbers automatically and waiting for someone to pick up.

"Wong's Chinese delivery, how can I help you?"

"Give me a number five and a number nine on the set menu."

The person on the other end of the line paused for a moment or two before speaking. "I have your location. The food will arrive in seven minutes. May I take your name and your method of payment?"

"Evelina. Put it on my tab." I longed to ask what Si had done. Why he'd had Ben's name scribbled down. I hesitated, knowing they wouldn't deviate from the set protocol of communication. The call ended and I put my phone back into the small pocket in my jacket.

The body of Si Channing would be taken and the room would be cleaned. It worked like clockwork. Except, clockwork didn't allow for personal feelings. And with Benedict it was now way too personal.

I stopped walking when someone mumbled something to me as I passed. Pulling out a fifty pound note from a small money pocket in my coat, I gave it a homeless man sitting in the doorway of an estate agency. It was cold tonight, and he was wrapped in a dirty blanket and large woolly hat.

"Thank you, miss. Thank you..." I was already walking away. Money

meant little to me. When things came easily, they often didn’t mean shit.

The conversation—or lack thereof—from my employer bothered me tonight. Years had passed with me ordering phantom Chinese food from a menu and being satisfied with the outcome. I was used to the lack of conversation from my employers. It didn't matter to me that they saw me as a commodity. I was damn good at my job and I liked it this way. Unnecessary connections wouldn't help me in this life. I'd been on my own coming into this world and I'd be on my own leaving it. But still, sometimes it would be nice to be in the know. Questions arose every now and then. And they were rarely answered, especially about a good man like Ben. It was all about me. I knew it. I'd got him into this.

I turned the corner and the aroma of freshly brewed coffee hit me hard. Sucking it in, a frisson of excitement bubbled. It was my favourite part of the day. My reward for a good night's work. Pushing away everything else for a few minutes, I focused on my beverage and the large sweet muffin I'd soon be eating. I needed food like everyone else, but blood kept me alive. Very soon I'd have to replenish, but, for now, this would be enough to get me home again.

And then I would deal with the Ben situation.

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CHAPTER THREE

I couldn't keep going without a feed. And I didn't mean the yum-yum I devoured earlier, right after the muffin, either. 11:00 a.m. and I was back out after a catnap. Dressed as usual in my knee-high red boots, a pair of black leggings, a lacy bodice and my trusty leather jacket, I went to my local blood bank. There were a handful of venues I would frequent, but today I was in The Prestige, one of my favourites.

Feeding was a weekly occurrence—or more if you exerted a lot of energy when doing your job. Si Channing wasn't a hard kill, but he was the last of the work week so I needed topping up.

This sort of place was my home away from home. Recently they'd popped up everywhere in plain sight. Back then, it was all undercover in case someone took offence. Or thought you were a witch for being involved in the supernatural.

The Prestige was a huge building divided into three floors. The ground floor was for dancing. Then it was the chill-out lounge and casino. And the penthouse was for private members only. The state-of-the-art elevator connected to the private entrance needed an eye scan and fingerprint check to move.

Privacy was everything in this business. Slipping my sunglasses into an inner pocket on my jacket, I lounged back against the mirrored walls of the huge lift. The vivid red of my hair shone against the abrasive lights in the capsule. I didn't bother looking back at the reflection staring at me. It never changed, anyway.

I journeyed in luxury to the top floor. The members' only part of the building was lush. Always busy with vampires, but I felt like I could have been the only vamp on the premises. Bold colours, expensive furnishings and discreet staff who didn't look you in the eye.

"Your usual suite is available, Ms Evelina." I nodded my thanks as I

walked down the darkened hallway to the final door on the right. Inside, the motion sensor lights sprang to life as I shucked off my jacket and lay it gently over the back of the one of many chairs in the large room. I took my seat on the sofa, my choice of beverage already served and ready for me on the table.

The ice in the water clinked on my teeth as I took a sip. It chilled my throat as excitement heated my blood at the prospect of replenishing. It was pleasurable for me—like a hefty meal in an expensive restaurant leaving and sated.

The large TV in front of me sprang to life, but instead of reality television or depressing news, this was real life.

Men and women from all walks of life paraded in front of the cameras, half naked. And I had to take my pick of who I would be feeding from tonight. It was a chore that bored me, if I was being honest. But still, it needed to be done.

Blood clubs like this one were popular the world over. There were those that liked to pretend to be vampires and lived the lifestyle as they thought it would be, but I had never been in contact with them. And then there were those who were fully aware of the creatures that roamed the night and freely offered their blood in exchange for the exquisite drug that came from us.

To be technical, it was our spittle that got them on a drug-high. But most vampires would at least lick or kiss their blood-giver to make it a little more romantic and less scientific. And it was exactly why I'd never kissed Ben—I couldn't risk getting him high.

Ben. He hadn't been very far from my mind since the moment I read that fucking piece of paper at the nightclub. I still didn't know what to do. Could it have been a co-incidence? Some random piece of information because he was a respected doctor at the local hospital? My mind said maybe, but my instincts said no.

I sighed, knowing I needed to get my mind working again and the only way I was going to achieve that was to drink blood. Tonight, I was in the mood for O Type. Nothing unusual there. All blood types tasted different; O was the equivalent of a sugar rush. Yeah, I had a sweet tooth and it was my favourite way to indulge whether by blood

or junk food.

The O's kept on parading until one woman, probably in her thirties, caught my eye. I'd drunk from her before so my body knew what she tasted like and my mouth watered. It was more than that, though. Kelly—that was her name—had reminded me of my best friend when I was sixteen. It was a taste of the past, almost, and sometimes I just needed to remember I hadn't always been an abomination of life.

I pressed the small, discreet button on the table as I placed my glass of water back onto the solid wood mahogany. The screen went dead and the lights dimmed in the room as a hidden door to my left opened and in walked Kelly.

The woman kept her eyes down at her feet and walked up to where I was sitting on the settee and stopped.

"Mistress," she purred.

I sighed and rolled my eyes. The blood clubs had rules for their donators. Always refer to the vampire as your superior, never look them in the eye, always bend to their wishes. It was tiresome and outdated, but I had long ago stopping trying to change it and make a personal connection with them.

Not bothering with formalities, I got to my feet and stepped into her personal space. Many vampires would make love to their blood-givers as well, but I wasn't one of them, despite Kelly being beautiful and being dressed in only her underwear, I moved straight to her throat and the pumping pulse that was making my insides fidget like a three-year-old.

My fangs popped out from my gums as my breath heated her skin, making goose-bumps pucker all over her naked skin. The puncture of my teeth against her pale skin was quick, but not painless. Her deep hiss had me holding her arms still, but this wasn't her first trip to the feeding zoo and she braced herself. It would be worth it in her eyes in the end, anyway.

Blood filled my mouth and trickled down my throat. I felt what she was feeling; elation, fear, arousal, pain...all of it made the experience more, somehow. The many thousands of people I'd drunk from since I'd been turned were all a part of me in a small way. Maybe that was

all I was looking for; humanity. I'd lost mine, after all.

It would have been easy to drink until the woman in front of me was a lifeless mess, but I always *attempted* to keep to the rules. She tasted too good. I needed to stop soon; otherwise, she would be too weak to function for a time.

Benedict's face popped up in my vision. For a moment I allowed a fantasy to overtake me, drinking Kelly's blood for a second or two longer than necessary.

Reluctantly, I dislodged my teeth from her veins and licked the small wounds I'd made. She shivered in my arms and I knew that my saliva was hitting the spot for her. The tiny marks disappeared as I let my tongue swirl over her skin.

My fantasy was dismissed from my mind, as was the young woman in front of me. "Thank you, Kelly." I said softly, still holding the girl steady.

She didn't look me in the eye, but I saw the lifting of her mouth into a smile. I tilted her chin and her beautiful blue eyes grew wide as they met mine. I kissed her mouth, then. My tongue whipped inside her open lips and I clashed with hers in a brief pairing before I pulled away. It was the least I could do since she'd tasted so divine and she'd sated my need for Ben. For now.

Kelly's eyes were fully dilated and satisfaction flowed hard and heavy through me from being fed. "You can leave, now." Without a word, the woman disappeared through the door from which she had arrived not ten minutes before.

Nowadays I was a quick drinker, preferring my sustenance to the pleasure it would bring. It wasn't always the case. I had been known to make a feed last all night. Now, it wasn't fun to make it last.

Grabbing my jacket and putting it on, I moved to the bathroom and stood in front of the mirror. The reflection peered back at me once more as I warily stared into the mirror. It wasn't fun to look at myself. Sometimes there was nothing at all, and other times there was too much to see.

Blood around my ruby-red lips and on my chin drew my attention. Licking what I could off my lips, I took a tissue from the well-stocked

counter-top and dabbed at the red. As nice as it was to connect with another via feeding, it was tiresome twenty years ago. Now, it was downright fucking monotonous. Humanity, or not.

What I needed was a change.

The smash of the closed door behind me had me spinning and ducking down, grabbing my trusty weapon automatically. The splintering of wood rained down over me, but I kept my stance and my gaze steady, waiting for my opportunity to find out what the fuck was going on and who'd butted in on private time.

White, scary arse looking eyes stared back at me through the darkness. A *daemonium venator*. Or a hunter, to you and me.

He was here to kill me. Well, *that* was definitely a change.

Fuck.

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CHAPTER FOUR

He would have been mistaken for a man, once upon a time. He was dressed in a dark grey suit and red tie, his hair sleeked back into dark waves sitting over his ears. Maybe he'd been a great looking guy back in the day. Now, he was a beast, attacking from the shadows in pure blood lust. I decided this fucker wasn't taking me down today.

The guttural scream he made almost froze the excess blood in my body. He dove at me with a speed that took me off guard as the full weight of his body was delivered in one swift and blistering kick to my chest. I gasped for breath, scrambling backward on the white marble of the bathroom floor, my bones on fire from the hit. No chance to steady myself as he struck me again, this time his hands reaching my throat and attempting to squeeze what life there was left out of me.

My dagger...I groped around on the floor as my eyes bulged. Whatever kept my physical body alive in my un-dead world was rapidly depleting. Trying to keep my focus on my weapon, my mind began to go foggy and my gropes became desperate until at last I had it back into my hand and was punching at his body with lightning speed as the blade ripped through the suit and the skin underneath.

The fingers around my neck eased slightly, at least enough to be able suck in air. I got a foot in his mid-section and pushed hard, allowing myself some breathing room. I couldn't re-group. There was no time.

The hunter—he would have no name, only a number—bled freely across the white floor. And his blood stunk to high Hell. A sure-fire way to be sure you were dealing with evil.

"Who sent you?" I struggled to my feet as I watched him ready himself for another attack. He said nothing.

"Tell me and I'll make your death quick. I know you're old and you want an end." A light briefly flickered behind his eyes. They were once

blue, I noticed, but it didn't last for long. If there was ever a time to simply get on and kill, it was now.

"I know nothing." The hunter's voice was deep, not quite human, and I knew that was as much as I was going to get.

"Then your death will be painful." I stood in stance, awaiting the onslaught again. My ribs hurt, my chest was killing me and my throat felt three inches smaller than it should be. But I was ready to kick arse.

This time when he dove towards me, I was ready for him. The knife in my hand glittered under the stark lights of the room and I twisted it skilfully as he neared.

Slicing across his throat, it stopped the attack and he fell to the floor. The first cut was, in fact, the deepest. I smiled at my own joke through the adrenaline spurring on my body as I knelt beside his prone body. Blood squirted out of the mortal wound as Mr Channing's had done earlier. Difference was this covered me almost from head to foot.

A hunter's blood was thin as he was constantly bloodletting and regenerating. He wouldn't die from this wound. I needed to finish him if I wanted to walk away from The Prestige in one piece.

"Give me a name—something." He shook his head and I sighed, weary of all the bullshit. This man/beast was once like me, alive and full of life. But instead of being turned into a vampire, he was one of the unlucky ones who got turned into a hunter. He'd led a life following, almost a brain-dead existence. Goodness knows how long he'd lived for. Some were a thousand or more years old, but they were always dressed in some sort of suit, bizarrely. Even the women. It was like a uniform.

"I'm sorry, buddy, I gotta do this. It isn't personal." I did feel bad, though, as I grabbed hold of his neck and used a chopping motion to sever his head clean off his shoulders. It was brutal, sickening and absolutely necessary. It didn't faze me in the slightest.

The blood instantly stopped flowing, and dried into a dark red mud. The hunter's body shrivelled, almost like it was losing its moisture.

"Fuck," I said moving back. "Why did you have to attack me, dude?

We're basically doing the same job, here. I go after the bad guys they tell me to, and you kill the vampires who break the law. Why me? Why right now? Have I done something wrong? Scratch that," I thought after a second or two. "Which bit of what I've done has pissed off the wrong person?" All questions I doubted I'd have the answer to any time soon.

I stood up and moved back from the body. A phone fell out of the dirty suit in front of me and skidded across the acres of blood on the floor to my feet. Immediately I bent and picked it up, flicking through it.

Then stopped on his text messages. I read then re-read the last two saved messages.

"She's become a problem. Kill her." No guesses on who they were talking about there.

And the other one, sent from an anonymous sender about twelve hours ago, "We have our link. Take him out." The second one had a photo.

Benedict Hamilton. A deep foreboding raced through my veins and I knew I couldn't let this happen. He wasn’t like me; he was a good man and didn't need to be involved in all this. I needed to end this, now, before it was too late for Ben.

This was all too much excitement for a Thursday. The killing last night and now the feeding had turned into one big fuck-up. I stuck to orders and didn't kill out of turn. There were rules and I kept to them. I glanced down at the hunter at my feet. He attacked first, so of course I'd defend myself.

The hunter was controlled by the V13, too. Different department. He was made to kill vampires. I was simply a hired assassin of whoever fucked them off the most. Nothing special about me. A commodity until they didn't need me any longer.

Maybe I'd out-lived my usefulness.

What I needed to do was stop it from escalating by getting to Ben before they did. Right after I washed the dried hunter blood from my skin and clothes because currently I reeked as if I'd gone eight rounds with a skunk.

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CHAPTER FIVE

The hospital smelled of disinfectant and sick people. I screwed up my nose as I walked the short distance from the main entrance to where the Accident & Emergency department was situated. Even the blood I could smell was tainted by all the drugs that flowed through the patients' veins. I lost my appetite for the cream cake I was eating and dumped it into a passing wastebasket.

Desperation filled the corridors as I walked down the narrow pastel green entrance into the main body of the hospital, my heeled boots clicking gently on the tiled floor, but nobody paid me any attention despite standing out like a sore thumb.

Being a vampire opened you to what others felt. Yeah, you could feel it when you drank their blood, but you'd also experience it in large places like hospitals and schools. There were simply too many frazzled emotions for us not to. Sometimes it sucked being a vampire. I snorted, startling an elderly lady in a wheelchair parked outside a room in only her hospital gown.

As soon as I walked into the A&E department, noise erupted from the once quiet hospital. It was chaos in there. Children were crying and their parents looked stressed, some others were bleeding from various parts of their bodies, and still more looked near death or had broken limbs. Many were in pain. Most were pissed off at being stuck there—probably for hours. The desolation emanating from here would have made it my kind of place, most other days. Today it was all on Ben and getting to him on time.

I went up to the main desk where a tired looking nurse sat writing notes. "Excuse me; I'm looking for Dr. Hamilton. Can you tell me where I can find him please?"

She neither looked up nor stopped writing. I frowned, waiting a moment or two. At last she sighed noisily. "Have you booked in with main reception?"

"I'm not sick. I'd like to see Dr. Hamilton. It's personal." Did she pick up on my irritation? She looked up then, assessing me carefully. I lifted my chin at the inspection.

"Dr. Hamilton is very busy. Have you a name?"

"Yeah, I've got a name." I ground my teeth trying not to succumb to snapping. It wasn't her fault this was a life or death situation. Her large brown eyes stared straight at me and moments passed of silence in the noisy room.

"Can I take your name, please? I can't guarantee he'll see you, but I can leave him a message."

I glanced up at the clock behind her desk. 1:57 p.m. I still had time before the scheduled attack. And if I knew the people who usually arranged these sorts of things, it would be on time almost to the second.

I changed tactics and smiled, showing my white, glowing teeth. "Actually, you're right. He's probably too busy to see me. I'll catch him after his shift. Toodle-oo." If there was ever a sickly sweet tone, that was it. I vaguely wondered whether she knew she was being placated. If she did, there wasn't much of a change in her. She simply nodded and went back to writing again.

My smile instantly dropped and I made like I was walking toward the exit. At the last moment, I switched direction, following a young medical professional through a double set of doors. It was quieter in here, and less hectic on the senses. I took a deep breath. These were the examining rooms. He would probably be around here if I had to hazard a guess.

"Can I help you?" A small man with a moustache which looked like it might eat his face up at any second stopped in front of me, a smile at the ready.

"Oh, thank you for stopping. I think I'm lost. I've just spoken to Dr. Hamilton and now I can't find him." For a moment I thought the man might call me out on the lie, but he turned and pointed to a small door which was partially open.

"Mrs. Jacobs? He's waiting for you in exam room five. He has your blood results back." I touched the man's arms, still smiling widely and

he blushed.

"Thank you, sir. You've been such a help." I moved away before he said anything else and hesitated at the door.

This was it. The one person I'd vowed not to see again would be here in front of me and I'd have to explain, say *something* about why I disappeared from his life. Seconds drew out and my throat closed.

"I'm a killer, for fucks sake." I said quietly. Surely I could lie to a human about this. I could make him believe me if I needed to.

Still I hesitated. I didn't want to hurt him again. But I also didn't want him to die.

Before I could chicken out, I pushed open the door and stepped inside, letting the door close behind me.

Ben sat behind the desk, blue scrubs on and glasses slipping down his nose. He was writing fast, in his usual no nonsense penmanship. His hard, tanned muscled arms were as delectable as I remembered. And capable. And perfect. The slight bump on his nose was cute as was his ruffled dark hair where he would push his fingers through.

Fuck, I was stupid for doing this. But Jesus I missed him. I even missed his bad singing in the shower after we'd have sex.

"Hey, Doc. How have you been?" The quick movement of his pen stopped as did my breathing. Long seconds passed and I wondered if I should say something else. Remind him that I was still in the room. Should I leave? Maybe make another entrance, this time with my dagger in hand?

Anxiousness and annoyance bubbled up the longer there was silence between us.

"Evey." That single word turned my insides to mush and all the negativity floated away. Yet he still didn't look up. Placing his pen on the file he was writing in, he pushed back his chair, standing up to his full height of six foot three inches. He towered above me by around a foot.

At last his gaze turned towards mine and I finally saw how tired he was. How beautiful he still was. And how much I definitely didn't deserve him.

That why you left him, dumbass.

No words. We both just stared at each other and the seconds turned into a minute or more.

"I'm here because I need you to leave the hospital with me, right now."

He considered my words. "Why?"

"Because I'm asking you to do this for me. I don't think I can tell you everything right now. I might be able to at some point, but right now. No. I," Swallowing, I re-grouped. "I don't deserve your trust, because I haven't earned it. But I need you to do this for me."

"Okay."

I blinked, expecting a fight.

"Okay?" I said dumbly? "Just like that?"

He nodded, moving around the desk and slowly walking toward me. "You haven't earned my trust. And I'm not sure why you've come back after all this time, but I'm trusting my instincts here. I'm trusting you. If you need me to do something, then I will. Then you're going to leave me the hell alone and not come back here, ever."

The last words were said on an even tone with an edge of ice. My eyes widened at the hurt hiding behind his words. Maybe my heart did break a little more but why should I be surprised? I'd walked away from something special without a backwards glance.

I nodded, not quite trusting my voice.

Ben walked toward me, his saunter easy and natural considering how tall and big his frame was. "You look good, Eve." He said, his gaze travelling down my body. It lingered on my thighs. He was definitely a thigh man and he'd loved having my legs wrapped around his waist.

Heat sat high on my cheek bones and probably clashed with my hair colour, but I couldn't stop looking at him. This man did it for me more than anyone else had.

"So do you," I said at last. Ben looked up to my face and I knew I was breathing heavy. I turned to the door, fingers on the handle but hesitated. The clock on the wall said 2:06 p.m. so we had time. Time for what? I asked my brain.

I felt him approach me and I knew I should open the door and step

out into the relative safety of the busy hospital. But I froze, my legs couldn't have moved if they'd been on fire.

Ben stepped into my personal space, his hard chest pressed against my back. "You know, I wondered what would happen if you walked back into my life. I was pretty sure I'd have yelled at you. Told you where to go." His fingers tangled in my short red hair and wetness pooled in-between my legs. "But all I actually want to do is fuck you. Make you see what you missed out on when you left me."

His voice was soft and was so close to my ear I shuddered. My fingers gripped the handle tighter before I slowly turned around so I was breast to chest with him. "Fuck me, then." I couldn't believe I was doing this considering I was here to get him away from danger. Was I fucking nuts?

A resounding yes echoed through my brain.

In one swift movement, Ben had his hands clamped around my waist as was lifting me as he strode back to his desk. Dropping me to the ground, I stumbled but he didn't bother to right me.

His hooded gaze was watching me intently and he leaned into me, pushing all the paperwork off his desk and onto the floor.

Excitement almost had me panting as I waited, needing him to punish me for leaving him, as I'd been doing for months to myself.

Ben spun my body around and pushed me down to the table and I grasped the edge of the wood. Pulling down my leggings to my knees, he exposed my backside since I didn't bother with knickers, unless it was a special occasion.

Running his fingers along my curves, he spread my thighs as far as they would go with the leggings, and plunged his fingers inside of my pussy.

"Fuuuck," I mumbled into a stapler that hadn't been shoved off the table. Thrusting in and out with his fingers, I knew it wouldn't take me long to explode. "I want you inside me."

I didn't know if he'd heard me or not as his fingers kept pulsing inside me, in and out, making a rhythm that would take me over the edge. Then I heard it, the rip of the foil and I knew he was going to fuck me.

Ben slipped his cock inside me in one motion, filling me to the hilt. Tears gathered in my eyes but I refused to cry for what I'd lost.

"Is this what you want, Evey?" He thrust hard against my backside once, twice. "Have you missed me fucking you? Or have you had another man taking my place?" Any movement stopped and I barely dared to breathe.

"There's no one else," I said at last.

"I don't believe you." Ben ran his hand up my back, over my jacket and into my hair. He pulled on it, hard, knowing I liked it.

It took me over the edge as Ben made his last thrust inside me, grunting his own pleasure. We stayed in the same position for long moments until he pulled back, discarding the condom.

"Let's count that as a goodbye fuck. It meant as little to me as it probably did to you."

A lone tear travelled down my cheek as I reached behind me, pulling up my leggings. I felt dirty, not just from his words, but because I'd liked him fucking me hard. I wanted to do it again, right now. Show him that I was his to be used for his pleasure.

It was too late now, though. I'd made my bed and now I needed to sleep in it. Whether the nightmares were real or not.

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CHAPTER SIX

The man beside me was large and silent. He towered over my small form and I longed to step into his side, to feel his heat again. There was no way he was going to let it happen again, though.

My blood tingled and I knew his attackers were here at the hospital. It was about time we confronted all this. "Is there some private room here? Somewhere we won't be disturbed?"

"Already, Evey? You really can't get enough of me, can you?" The words were said quietly and I wondered how much of his new attitude was real and what was simply the hurt I caused him to come out.

"Get your brain out of your trousers and answer me. Is there somewhere private here?"

"The storage rooms on the basement floor."

I grabbed his hand and run toward the nearest set of lifts. Thankfully, it was a service one. Ben swiped a card to make it go all the way down to the bottom.

"Are you going to tell me what's going on?" He said at last as we stepped out into the partially lit corridor which led to the basement.

"I can't right now, but I guess you'll know soon enough." Assuming he'd been okay with that answer, I grabbed his hand again and pulled him into a darkened room, lit only by a single fluorescent light. It flickered, sending odd shadows across the wall.

"We'll be joined by someone soon. What I need you to do is stand back. And if something happens to me, run."

"What will happen to you?" Ben planted his hands on his hips and glared down at me. "Are you going to be straight with me?"

I opened my mouth to answer, but right then the lift doors opened. Another hunter stepped out, scanned his surroundings, and laid eyes on us, moving toward us.

"Is he your friend?" Ben whispered beside me.

"No," I said on a sigh. "But I think I killed his brother earlier on." A

sharp turn of his head had him scanning me to see if I was joking. I wasn't. This hunter had on the same tie as the one earlier. A vivid red colour with an intricate little pattern on it. So I guessed I was making this a family affair today.

Ignoring the distracting man beside me, I pulled out my dagger from my coat. "We don't have to do this, dude." My voice echoed around the eerie basement as boilers clonked in the background and air-conditioners whirred.

Again, this hunter was a talkative one. He kept walking towards me until he was about eight feet from us. Looking between me and Ben, this one pulled out a weapon. A silver truncheon looking thing. It looked more like a dildo but I was sure if it hit me on the head it would ring my bell.

"Okay, if you want him. You can come through me."

"Wait, I can defend myself." Ben said from beside me. "Maybe if I knew exactly what he was and what he wanted, I could do that better."

I smiled, "You really don't want to know what he is."

The hunter took my slightly distracted moment to pounce. His silver dildo swiped at the air, hitting my shoulder knocking my dagger out of my hand first then hitting Ben as the silly man attempted to help me.

Ben fell to the ground, a string of curse words flying off his tongue.

"Stay the fuck down, Benedict," I said as I whipped around, grabbing hold of the bastard's legs before he had another chance to whack Ben with the truncheon. The hunter hit the cement floor with a thud and I jumped on top of him. My shoulder hurt and he took advantage, throwing me over to my back.

Wrestling with the stinky beast, I finally got him into a triangle choke. The hunter wriggled, causing me to clench him as hard as I could to keep him subdued.

"I need my dagger!" In moments, Ben had it back in my hand.

"What are you going to do—Shit, Evey." Blood squirted everywhere as I sliced at his throat. I was getting good at these moves.

"You killed him." Ben mumbled close to my head somewhere.

"No, he won't die from this. I need to cut off his head to make sure he's really going to cop it."

"What? No." He was outraged I was trying to save him? That was a first, I had to admit.

Ben pulled the hunter off me. He was bleeding but he was limp for now. It wouldn't take long for him to gain his strength back and attack, though.

Kneeling over the bloodied body of the hunter, Ben checked his pulse. "There's no pulse. You did kill him."

"Don't be so sure. He's alive. As much as a hunter can be, anyway." I eased myself up off the ground, flexing my hurt shoulder. "But I'm okay, don't worry about me." Ben glanced over his shoulder, giving me the once more. I was glad it was slightly dark in here so he couldn't see my blush.

What was the matter with me, anyway? I wasn't twelve, but I was sure acting like it.

"You might not want to look. I need to finish him." I was on my feet above the hunter who was looking between us.

"I can't let you kill this man."

"He's not a man. Not any longer." I knelt down next to the hunter, carefully opening up his tie and ripping the buttons on his shirt to expose the skin underneath. "See these marks? They're scars from where all his organs were taken out years and years ago. There's nothing left in this body but the ability to follow orders from his superior."

Ben bent down to look at the scars, careful not to get too much blood on him. He coughed, putting the back of his hand against his nose. "I don't know if what you're telling me is true, but his blood is certainly infected. He needs to be taken up to the hospital and treated."

"No drug can fix this, Ben. Trust me. You want the truth? I'm giving you the truth. This man isn't human and he needs to die before he hurts someone else, namely you." I stood up and stepped away from the stench.

"How do you know all this?" He was still kneeling at the hunter's

side, but now he was looking up at me.

"Because." I took three deep breaths. It was time to tell him. He should know. Ben was going to hate me. "I'm a vampire and he's a hunter. He's the bug spray to my fly, or the bird to my spider. I'm a vampire, Ben."

Ben climbed to his feet, placing his hands on his hips. For long seconds I could see his mind going back and forth. At last he nodded and I exhaled the breath I didn't know I'd been holding.

"You got hit on the head by his big stick, didn't you?"

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CHAPTER SEVEN

In the end, we'd walked away from the hunter. He was gaining strength so I knew this wouldn't be the end of it. And Ben had told a nurse that someone was in difficulty downstairs. The nurse would be fine since she wasn't a target for the hunter, but the beast definitely wouldn't be there by the time she arrived. He was already regenerating.

I sighed as I hurried along next to Ben toward his car, wondering why the fuck I'd even bothered to tell him the truth. I'd told him I was a vampire and he hadn't believed me. *Goddamnit.* Now he thought I was on the crazy train.

We drove in silence all the way to my house. It was the first time Ben had been to my domain in all the months we were dating. I glanced over at him, my gaze lingering on how his blue scrubs tightened over his big thighs. When he'd fucked me earlier, it had brought back so many feelings I'd dismissed from my mind. Now they were all running rampage through my brain.

I wriggled in my seat as heat wound around my body. He'd masterfully taken control and thrown me on his desk and had his way with me. In a million years, I'd have never thought Ben would do that.

Pulling up outside the house, my blood felt strange. I blinked a couple of times, looked over at Ben who'd unfolded himself out of the vehicle and looked back at my house.

Slowly walking up the front steps, I hesitated at the door before I pressed my thumb against the scanner. The door un-clicked and I pushed it open.

Something was wrong.

My town house in Belgravia was quiet. Too quiet. I had a top of the line sound system that was programmed to switch on at 5:00 a.m. every morning and stay on if I didn't switch it off. The heating and several lights would turn on, too. It was shit coming home to a cold,

dark and silent house.

On this rainy, dark afternoon in November, everything was off.

I stood in the entrance, relying on my instincts to alert me to the problem.

"Evey, are you going to tell me what's going on?" Ben still stood on the steps at the front of the house, the light rain soaking his scrubs and making his hair stick to his forehead.

"Stay behind me."

My dagger was in my hand as the first small projectile whizzed straight past my right ear, crashing onto the outside steps next to Ben's feet.

"What the fuck." He tried to grab my hand and get me out of the way, but I pushed him away.

I needed to make a decision; in or out. It pissed me off that someone was in my house, but if there were hunters inside—and I knew from their choice of missile there was—they were going to hit hard.

I could run. With Ben. The option hung in the air.

Stepping back, another three silver ball bearings hit the wall of my hallways, making mini craters. "Fuck, you'll fucking pay for that, hunter. They've only just been plastered."

There was an underground passage into my basement. That was where I kept my arsenal. If they had weapons, I needed weapons. More than my trusty knife.

The figure which appeared in my doorway, took my breath away. He was monstrous. They'd called in the big-guns for this one.

"Am I seeing things or is there a giant in an Armani suit standing in your doorway?"

My lip wobbled—I wasn't sure if it was fear or mirth at Ben's reaction. Either way, this was going to get ugly, fast.

Hustling Ben along the road, and down a small wisteria sprinkled alley, I knew he needed more of an explanation that what he'd had already.

"I should probably have told you something right after the first time I stayed over at your flat." I was pushing Ben along the road running

away from the big bastard behind us.

"You think?" Ben looked over his shoulder at me, then at the big beast. "What the ever loving fuck is that?"

"In the business we know him as the BFG. But he isn't friendly. He's more like a Frankenstein creation than anything else. He doesn't care who he kills, maims, sits on, or eats."

"Good to know."

I bundled Ben into a small, heavy door which I bolted behind us. It led down steep, stone steps.

"Run faster, but be careful," I shouted from behind and he didn't need to be told twice. I followed him down the steps, taking two at a time. A thump against the door behind us told me The Big Fucking Giant had caught up with us.

At Ben's heels, I directed him through another door. We were underground now and we were closing in on the basement directly under my house. Motion lights switched on as we ran down the narrow passage and I was grateful I'd had all this fitted years ago.

"Is this your life, Evey? Being chased by beasts and smelly hunters? Is this what you did when you weren't with me?"

"Yes," I didn't hesitate. "That and killing. Did I tell you I was also an assassin for the government?"

Ben stumbled, and I wasn't sure whether it was from the admission or the slippery stone.

"Remind me not to piss you off in the future."

I smiled, then thought of the future and the smile disappeared. There wouldn't be one, there couldn't be. This was as good as it would get. For a vampire who could potentially live decades longer than the average human, there was no future. That made me want to cry into a caramel latte and a donut to feed my grief.

If it were possible, my heart broke a little more. I was a superb killer. I knew my job inside out, yet I couldn't help but hurt the one man I had loved in eighty years of this life? I made myself sick.

"Is Evey your real name?" We'd rounded a corner and I was now at the threshold to my basement. I used to the thumb scanner and eye scan to gain access.

"My name is Evelina. And if you're curious, I'm around one hundred and four years old. I've been a vampire for eighty years." Ben's mouth dropped open and I couldn't blame him. It's probably not easy to hear the woman you've been banging, who you pledged your undying love to, is actually an old hag who drinks blood. He recovered quickly and stepped into the room at my command.

I slammed the door shut behind us once more, breathing deeply. I locked everything down and turned back to Ben was who standing with his hands on his hips looking around the huge room underneath my house.

Of course Ben wouldn't be sucking it up. He ran for an hour every morning. I could eat cookies for an hour every morning.

"For what it's worth, you look pretty damn great for a centenarian." I blushed and then chastised myself for it.

"For what it's worth, Benedict, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you. I didn't mean to lie to you. It just happened. I wanted—"

"What did you want, Evelina?" I looked away. This was too much. All this touchy-feely crap was foreign to me. It had been so long but it was Ben. Ben made me want to trust in the sacred institution of love.

"I wanted to feel again. You helped me do that. It was an illusion. I see that now. But what I had with you," I turned to him. "Wasn't a lie for me. It was stupid for someone such as me, yes. But what I felt for you wasn't." I closed my eyes briefly, knowing my time with Ben had been a mistake. I'd been looking for a way to fit in, finally. But I never would. It was no good even trying.

"Hey," he said softly, leaning toward me and cupping my jaw in his large hand. "I still have no idea what's going on here. But I'm glad you told me your secret. I'm glad you finally trusted me. After you left, I told myself we'd had a whirlwind affair, and that it hadn't been real, but I've missed you every day since I last saw you. I told myself a lot of things to make it easier. None of this is easy, Evelina. It felt like I'd lost a piece of my heart. You made me feel like more of a man for falling in love with a woman as strong and independent as you."

"Please kiss me." The words were out of my mouth before I could think about it and backtrack. Ben wasted no time trailing his lips

along mine, then pushing deeper, his tongue dancing with mine. This would be a mistake, I knew it, but if this was going to be the last time with Ben, I wanted to feel everything.

He was right; he was a damn good kisser. I swooned as he wrapped his arms around me and cradled my body to his. My fingers fisted in his hair and made sure he wouldn't be able to break the sensuous hold on my mouth.

The situation we were in, all the death which surrounded me, faded away. It was only him and me. And a little part of me said it was always the way it was meant to be. We were meant to be together.

But he wasn't. I reluctantly pulled back, kissing his stubbled jaw as I stepped away from him. By now, he had to be drugged by me. My heart fell, knowing we were too different to a couple.

"I need to gather some items so I can fight the hunter who'll be coming to that door in about." I cocked my head to look at the door, listening to my body. "Fifty-five seconds."

"Okay, what can I do?" I squinted toward Ben, he didn't sound drugged. Looking closer, I peered at his eyes. They were normal, no obvious dilation. And his heart rate wasn't elevated and his blood wasn't moving through his veins quicker than it should have done.

"Do you feel any different?"

"Different? How? I have a hard-on, if that's what you mean?"

I couldn't help myself and I giggled. Anyone would think I was drugged. "Oh, I don't know. Like you could fly? Or run a marathon in thirty seconds?"

"All I want right now is you, Evey. It doesn't matter what you're telling me, our bodies were designed for one another. We were made for one another. You're vintage to my modern."

I threw my head back and laughed. Yeah, maybe I was slightly in awe of the way he was taking this. I shook my head, in some sort of loved-up trance, *obviously*. It didn't matter now. Nothing mattered except stopping the hit on Ben.

The carnage started a minute later.

Thumps on the wall, grinding metal, everything was pushed to its limit as multiple hunters attempted to infiltrate my basement. I wasn't

sure where they were all coming from, but it was starting to piss me off.

"Take this," I said handing Ben a large silver tipped sword. "Vintage, but still has its uses." He smiled, taking the heavy weapon and testing its weight. "Go for the throat or heart if you can."

Nerves had me biting my lip. I cracked my neck, knowing this was my sort of fight. But there was a lot riding on this. I glanced at the human next to me. He was surprisingly calm, his heart-rate normal. I shrugged and grinned as adrenaline poured through me, heightening my senses.

A thunderous noise erupted overhead, and a large hand passed through the six inch ceiling above. "Shit." I moved back, readying myself for the Giant to land in front of me.

The moment he landed, he started swinging his heavy fist at me. Dodging, ducking and diving, I stayed one step ahead of him. I swung the small sword I had in one hand, catching him in the rib area. He growled as blood spurted.

"Hey, buddy, sorry for pissing you off. It's either you or me." The giant changed tacks and ran at Ben who was in hand to hand combat with a small dwarf-hunter. The little guy had him pinned down while Ben was punching at him, attempting to get free. The sword I'd given him was nowhere to be found.

"Don't worry, I'll save the day." I chased after the giant who punted the little man off of Benedict before grabbing hold of the leg of the man I loved and swinging him around like a baseball bat.

"Yowwwwwww," I heard as I pierced the big one with my sword. It hit his heart and I pushed harder so it popped out the other side of his body. Dropping Ben with a clatter to the metal counter-top, I hit hard and fast, slicing my way across his body until I was leveraged enough to slice his throat. The giant dropped to his knees with a large expelling of air. It took me three attempts to sever his head, but I fucking did it.

"You really are a talented assassin, Evelina." That voice. I stopped my charge toward another hunter who'd appeared through the ceiling. Breathing deeply, I turned, not quite knowing what to expect.

"You—" My voice broke as I looked at the man who'd turned me, decades before.

"Evelina, my dear. You're as striking as ever." Blood curdled in my body and it took everything I had not to run at this prick and chop his fucking head up and stick it up his arse. Instead, I circled slowly toward him, moving constantly but slow enough not to cause alarm from the two hunters surrounding him.

"You're behind this hit on Ben."

"You're not allowed to have long-term love interests. You know that."

"So you're with the V13 now?" I asked, feeling sick I never knew this beast of a man was as far into my life as he actually was.

"I always have been. Why do you think we recruited you so quickly? You had the aptitude right from the start. It's why we cleared the way for you—"

"Cleared the way?" I knew what was coming. Dread flowed through my body. Ben came up behind me and stood at my side.

"We found you, took your family away, and made you into the bitter and focused woman you are today." I fought back tears of rage as the full picture came to me.

"So, of course, when you thought I was deviating from your plans with Ben, you needed to take him out."

My birther laughed, throwing back his head. "You were devious. I'll give you that. We didn't even know about your love affair until days ago when we were given some information about Benedict's family.

"What about my family?" Ben stepped closer to me and I could feel the heat emanating from him. He knew as I did, this would end badly.

"Your family are healers, son. Right the way back to the old times. Vampires came to you when they were hurt, and your family fixed them. You're all but extinct. When we found out what you were, we thought we'd take out two birds with one stone. Evelina has passed her prime, anyway."

The charge I made at my birther was hard and fast and I managed to slice his hand with a sword before a hunter was on top of me. "You bastard! You think you'll live after all this? I swear you will die at my

hand."

The old man dabbed at his bleeding hand with a pristine white handkerchief. "I'll leave my boys to do what they need to do."

I heard Ben shout behind me and I managed to look in his direction with the hunter holding me down. He'd been thrown across the room but he got straight up and run at the little hunter. He caught him square in the chest, sending me across the room. Picking up the sword, he chased him down and, in one swipe, chopped off his head.

Pleasure rippled through me. He was learning. That only left the hunter on top of me.

I wriggled underneath him, freeing my hands to push up from the ground. My birther had disappeared from the room and I needed to move fast if I expected to fulfil my promise to kill him.

"Stay there, sweetheart, I'm coming." Ben's voice was close and I knew he would do his best. Quite frankly though, if anyone was going to save me, it would be me.

I flipped forward, taking the hunter unawares and forward rolling away from his grabby hands. Grabbing hold of a wooden chair, I swung it, hitting him across the cheekbone and sending him down with a clatter.

"Here," Ben threw my dagger toward me and I grabbed it in turn sending it straight down into the hunter's throat. He gurgled blood, and it spilt over his expensive suit and onto my floor. Following the knife down, I straddled the hunter, grabbed my dagger and ripped his head off his shoulders in one swipe of the blade.

Stumbling off him, I stood shakily on my feet.

"Baby, are you okay?" Ben was at my side just as my legs gave way. He scooped me up, placing me on the edge of a metal counter-top where I usually cleaned my guns and weapons.

Checking me over completely, he breathed a sigh of relief. He had blood spattered down his scrubs and across his face. He looked tired and worse for wear, but he was amazing and I loved every part of him.

"Eve—"

"I love you, Benedict Hamilton. Whatever happens, remember that."

It was my first admission of love and the sweet smile he gave me was worth all the pain and death of today.

I saw the dagger spinning through the air a moment before it would have hit Ben in the back. I shoved the man that I loved out of the way, knowing it wouldn't miss my heart. My birther was running from the room, but pain spread through my body and I couldn't do anything about it.

The world went woozy almost immediately and I fell backwards onto the metal counter.

"What the fuck have you done," he was saying to the birther. "You've killed her." It was no use, though. He was already gone. He'd disappear just as he did eighty years ago.

"You can't die, Evelina. Don't leave me again."

I'm not dead yet, I wanted to say, but my mouth wouldn't work. I was at a loss for words. It must have been the first time that had ever happened.

I floated around a little, my mind detaching from my body—or so it felt. Ben was screaming at my side for someone to bring help as he prodded and poked at the wound. At one point he poured something over the gash and it stung like hell. I opened my mouth to scream. But no words came out.

This was it. This was what I'd been waiting for my whole life. I was finally going to die and this time, there was no coming back. No turning into a monster, and no drinking blood. It would be bliss... except, I realised I didn't want to go now. I was in love and I finally had something to live for. To fight for.

I was in love with Ben, for better or for worse. I wanted to buy a cat with him, buy plants and sleep in late on Sunday's. I wanted it all, I realised, but it was too late.

Ben's face came closer to mine. There were tears in his eyes. I wanted to wipe them away, tell him I didn't deserve his sadness, but I couldn't move. My mind was fading. It was actually a nice way to go. I always thought my death would be horrific and painful, but everything was numb. I wondered if I was going to Hell, now.

"I'm so sorry, Evelina. I love you, I always have." The room blacked

out and I was pretty sure I was dead.

Bummer.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

The light poured through my bedroom window hitting my face and making me squint. I opened my eyes properly and blinked a couple of times.

Was I still dead? Was this Hell? The white blinds at the window looked familiar. Did the devil have the same interior decorator as me? My mind went fuzzy again.

"Good morning." Ben stood next to the bed, wearing the same things he was wearing when I... died.

"Am I dead?"

"Technically? Yes, I think vampires are dead, aren't they? Or is it un-dead. I have no idea."

"No—"

"Yeah, I know what you mean." He looked down at his shoes and pushed his glasses back up his nose. He was cuter than any man should be.

"Give it to me straight, Doc. Will I live to kill again?"

Ben looked up and directly at me, looking at me harder than maybe anyone had before in my lifetimes. It made me uncomfortable in a way. It was also invigorating to know that he actually cared.

"I nearly lost you again." I opened my mouth to talk, to apologise for bringing him into all this. Before I could, he lifted his hand to shut me up. I clamped my teeth together and waited for him to finish. "This wasn't about you putting me at risk, Evey. This was about us finding each other. You saved my life from the hunters, and I saved yours."

Nodding, I looked down at my chest where the knife had landed. I lifted the bandage. The wound was vicious, but it was healing. "How did you do it?"

Ben lifted his left hand to his hair and ran his fingers through it. It was the first time I'd noticed the bandage on his wrist.

Moments passed as what he'd done caught up with me. "Your blood

saved me?" My voice wobbled. No one had ever made a sacrifice for me before.

"My O-type is apparently what you need." The sweet stuff, as I knew it would be.

"Thank you, Ben. I don't know how to make that up to you—"

"Marry me." Those two words hung in the air like the hunter's bad smell. Except this time, I didn't want to get away from it.

"You know that the birther is going to come after us again?"

"Yes. And I figured you could teach me how to fight like a girl." He winked and I chuckled. "You're amazing. I fell for you the moment you spilled your coffee on me at the cafe. It was fate that you flew into my life and turned my world upside down. I want that forever. I want you. Please, marry me." Ben dropped to his knee at the side of the bed and touched my ankle, which was still covered by the blanket.

"I'll marry you on one condition."

"What is it?"

"You do me over your desk again at work." It was Ben's turn to throw back his head and laugh. He pushed himself to his feet and sat beside me on the bed.

"You definitely have a deal." Ben's head dropped toward mine and kissed me, thoroughly. I now knew why he couldn't be drugged by me. His blood was special. And I was addicted to it and him.

"This bed is too big for me alone," I said in between kisses. It didn't take him long to get naked and join me under the covers. I snuggled up to him, knowing I was the luckiest vampire alive to find a good man to love this bad girl.

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Xandra James is a British author over 30 *cough*, slightly obsessed with caffeine, and definitely addicted to chocolate chip muffins.

When not reading romance books, she's writing them. And she can get so far into the new worlds she's creating, that you can often find her still slobbing around her house after lunchtime with bed hair and no idea what day it is!

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The Truce by Bethany Shaw

Shep hates the Florida Everglades. It's hot, humid, oh and his ex lives there. Abby is the one woman he wants but can never have. She's a werewolf and he's a vampire who can't give her what she needs, which is why he chose to end their relationship years ago. His goal is to kill the vampire preying on the innocent and stirring up the local community without being noticed by Abby's pack. All is going to plan until he falls six floors to his temporary death. It's a good thing vampires heal fast. He wakes up ready to stake the menace wreaking havoc, but fate has different plans. Not only is he chained and locked in a cage, but also his cellmate is the one woman he wants but can never have. He can't stand the thought of anything happening to Abby and vows to keep her safe, but that's going to be easier said than done.

Twenty-three years ago Shep walked out on Abby, taking her heart with him. She moved on as best as she could and has secured a role as an enforcer in her father's pack much to his chagrin. When a routine patrol goes awry, Abby finds herself face to face with the man who still holds a piece of her heart. What's worse, the rabid vampires that captured them plan to make them a meal. When Shep suggests a truce to get out of their predicament she hesitantly accepts. But the last time they worked together she lost a piece of herself and she never truly got it back. Can she escape the hostile environment and keep her heart from getting broken again?

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The Truce By Bethany Shaw

CHAPTER ONE

Shep grunted as he opened his eyes. Stiff but healed, he was sprawled out on a concrete floor. He pushed himself up, fighting the dizziness in his head. His vision doubled and his head pounded, probably from the fall he'd taken earlier while trying to capture the homicidal vampire he was hunting. The maniac had let him live, and that'd be the last mistake he ever made. A well-placed stake to the heart was in order. He needed to feed, and then he'd track down the rogue and finish the job. He had to get out of the Florida Everglades before he ran into the one person he wanted to see, but shouldn't.

He swiped his arm across his sweat-slicked forehead and groaned. *Stupid humidity.* The heat took its toll on everyone, even vampires. It amplified the smell of everything – dirt, sweat, body odor…

The smell of blood assaulted his senses, making his gums pulse as his fangs tore through. His belly grumbled with hunger. He rolled over, hissing as he sought out his meal. It was close, he could practically taste it.

His arm caught on something and he tugged, but it wouldn't come free. He squinted, cocking his head to the side. A thick metal cuff was locked around his one wrist. A chain leading away from the shackle was anchored to a spot in the floor by the corner.

What the hell? That bastard captured me? Oh, hell no! He won't get the slip on me again. Feed. Then you can get free.

He hopped to his feet, yanking on the bindings again. They didn't budge. He inhaled, breathing in the sweet aroma of blood again. Whoever was bleeding smelled amazing, and oddly familiar. He was going to enjoy sampling them.

"You're not going to get loose," a familiar female voice told him.

Shep spun on his heel, meeting the prettiest sea-blue eyes he'd ever

seen. His heart dropped. “Abby? What are you doing here?” He closed his eyes and opened them, making sure he wasn’t hallucinating. Abby was still sitting in the opposite corner with her legs sprawled out in front of her.

She shook her head, sending her wavy auburn hair cascading over her shoulders. “I imagine the same thing you are.”

“I don’t suppose you know *where* we are?” he asked, eyeing her. She was just like he remembered. Standing not much taller than five feet, she was all muscle. Dried blood caked her clothes and hair. His eyes flickered as he balled up his fists. The man who hurt her was as good as dead. No one laid a hand on her.

“I’d reckon an abandoned building. A prison most likely.” She tossed her hands toward the large, steel cell door. Her chains rattled with her movements.

“So perceptive,” he said with a roll of his eyes. She still had her snark. Back in the day, he’d found it cute. “How long have you been here?”

“Not long. They got me during patrols tonight,” she told him with a huff. “You?”

“Same. Wait! They?” he asked.

“There’s more than one.”

“Shit.” He let out a long breath and tugged on his bindings again. They needed to get out of here before they became a meal.

“Yeah,” she said as she flexed her hands. “I found that out the hard way, too.”

“How many?”

She licked her lips as she stood, rocking on her feet. “At least six. That’s how many different scents we picked up.”

“Six?” This problem was worse than he’d been told. Did the council know there was more than one ravenous vampire out there? Probably not. If they had, they would’ve shared that information with him.

“What are you doing on pack lands?” she asked.

“This is a vampire problem. I was sent here to clean up the mess. And I wasn’t on your lands. Trust me,” he said, glaring. He knew exactly where the property line was for Abby’s pack, and had

purposefully avoided the area to keep from running into *her*. He swallowed, flicking his gaze over her. The vampires could do what they wanted to him, but hell would freeze over before he'd let them lay another hand on Abby.

His eyes roamed over the cell, searching for a way to escape.

She crossed her arms over her chest. "I don't suppose you have backup?"

"No. You know I like to work alone."

"Fantastic."

"What about you?" Enforcers usually went out in numbers from what he remembered. Was she still an enforcer, or had the vampires invaded the pack?

Her eyes flickered to the floor and the hard set of her face faltered, showing her vulnerability. He recalled her words from a few moments ago. She'd said *we*.

"They killed him," she said.

He sighed. "I'm sorry, Abby."

Her eyes darted to his, accusing. "Don't patronize me. We both know you don't give a damn about werewolves."

He held his hands up in surrender. It was no secret that vampires and the were-community hated each other. They tended to stay out of each other's way unless they had to cross paths. The exception to the rule had been he and Abby, but that was years ago and they weren't on friendly terms anymore. They hadn't spoken in decades. Not since he'd told her he could never get serious with a werewolf. He hadn't been nice about it either.

A scream pierced the air, and they both turned to their cell door. The wolf's heart picked up as it thundered against her ribs. His fangs ached and the points jabbed into his lower lip. Her blood called to him. She'd shared with him before while they'd made love all those years ago. Would she allow him now? He didn't have to kill her, a little nibble would go a long way. Hell, she'd used to like it when he bit her, practically begged him to do it. Part of him wondered if she still tasted the same. His stomach gurgled.

It didn't help that the smell of fresh blood wafted in the air,

carrying through the hall to their cell. He inhaled deeply as more screams ripped through the air. He pitied the person being fed upon. Judging by the wails, their death was being drawn out so the vampires could suck every ounce of blood from them. This was why he needed to stop the monsters behind the feedings. Vampires needed to stay low profile and away from the human radars. This group was making a mess of everything and had the local PD swarming all over the Glades. The loons had attracted the werewolves' attention too, obviously.

His gaze darted to Abby. He closed his eyes and forced his fangs to retract. Abby was the one woman he could never hurt – physically. Her heart was another matter. Still they needed to set their differences aside to get out of this.

A truce. That might not be such a bad idea.

He walked as far as his shackle would allow him. "Do you have as much lead way as me?" he asked.

She narrowed her eyes. "Why?"

"Our best bet is to work together," he said, beckoning her to come forward.

Her brows rose, but she made no effort to move.

"Abby, hear me out. Neither of us wants to be here. But here we are, trapped and waiting for psychotic vampires to come eat us alive. I think we could form a temporary truce to get out of this, don't you?"

She bit her lip and narrowed her eyes. "What did you have in mind?"

"Can you come to the center of the cell?"

With a sigh, she unrolled the chains from her knuckles and moved to the center of the room.

"Good." Shep joined her, staring down into her eyes. He could get lost in her gaze so easily. She cleared her throat and he looked away. "Can you still fight?"

"Of course." She balled her fists, flexing her bicep muscles for emphasis.

"When they come in, we can take them. Together. They won't be expecting that."

She nodded. “Good idea.”

“The intel I’ve gathered suggests they feed three or four times a night. I was only allowing for one vampire, and it’s probably more than that. My bet is we won’t have to wait long.” He clenched his hands at his side at the thought. There were a lot of ways to die. Being a victim to cannibalism wasn’t one that he wanted. Then there was Abby – he couldn’t stand the thought of her death. Even after all this time, he cared for her more than she’d ever know. He’d have to find a way to protect her while keeping his feelings a secret.

“Until they come, I prefer to stay in my corner.” She backtracked away from him.

He sighed, not really blaming her. After he left he never thought he’d see her again, especially like this. The closer they were, the more he wanted to touch her. It wouldn’t happen. They were enemies, after all.

***

Abby watched Shep as he paced back and forth, unable to avert her gaze. He was well over six feet tall with dark chocolate-colored hair and eyes. Muscles rippled underneath his black tee, and she bit her lip watching as his butt worked while he walked. Just because he was her enemy, and her ex, didn’t mean she couldn’t peek.

He hadn’t said anything since they’d agreed to work together. What was there to say? It was best to leave the past in the past. Like it or not, she would need his help to get out of here. The vampires that had gotten the drop on her and her partner were strong, fast, and ruthless.

The screaming had finally subsided a few hours ago. Whoever had been pleading was long dead. The smell of their decaying corpse wafted in the air, making Abby cringe and fight the constant urge to gag.

It was only a matter of time before the vampires grew hungry again. Then either she or Shep were next. She swallowed at the thought, remembering the way they’d torn into her partner’s throat. Her fingers went to her pulse point, rubbing. *I’m not going to die like that. I don’t want Shep to die like that.* Even after everything, her heart ached at the thought of living in a world without him. He’d broken

her heart when he'd left, and it still hadn't recovered. It probably never would. He was her mate, she was sure of it, but he was a vampire. It was unnatural and wrong, and their bond would never be accepted.

Metal grated on metal, drawing her out of her thoughts. Her eyes shifted to the cell door, then to Shep.

He nodded at her. "Someone's coming."

She crouched, ready to spring to the center of the room the second the vampire entered. Footsteps thumped down the hall drawing nearer. Why couldn't they just hurry up already? The suspense was killing her.

Two men came into view. A growl vibrated in her throat as she narrowed her eyes.

"Let's take him. She's too tiny to sate my hunger," one of them said, indicating Shep.

First time in my life being short has ever helped me out, go figure.

Shep's eyes darted to her then back to the two men as they shoved a key into the lock on the door and twisted. She inhaled and let it out. Part of her was relieved they weren't interested in her. The other part was terrified for Shep.

The door squealed against the concrete floor and she winced at the noise as it grated on her sensitive ears. One of the men pulled something from his back pocket. A stun gun.

Shep shot forward and she made her move too, lunging out and jumping onto one of the vampire's backs. She wrapped the excess slack in her chain around the man's throat and pulled with all her might. The vampire staggered backwards, slamming her body into the wall.

Although the breath whooshed out of her lungs, she clung to him and refused to let go. He took a step forward and then thrust himself back, smashing her against the wall again. Her thighs gripped him tighter as she tugged on the chains.

I'm not letting go.

Something sharp tore into her forearm, and she screamed as pain ripped through her appendage. Her vision wavered. *The vampire was*

feeding from her. She shoved off the wall, dropped her feet to the ground, and kicked out the back of the vampire's knee. Both of them fell to the floor. She hopped on him, whimpering as she tore her arm free from his mouth. Driving her knee into his back, she pressed the whole of her weight into him while pulling up on the chains. The man struggled, writhing beneath her and nearly bucking her off. He was bigger than her, but his air supply had to be dwindling by now.

The man stopped moving. With one last strangled breath, his eyes rolled shut. *Finally*. Her gaze snapped to Shep, who was fighting the other vampire hand to hand. He appeared to have the upper hand at the moment. It'd be good if he kept it.

Abby moved as far as she could, wrapping her hands around both sides of the man's head and twisting. A crack ripped through the cell as he fell lifeless to the floor. Both men were out, but they'd wake. Since they'd fed a few hours ago, they'd wake quickly.

"We need to move." Shep knelt down, flipped the vampire over and patted his jean pockets.

Abby didn't need to be told twice. She moved to the vampire she'd strangled, feeling for a key.

"Got it." Shep stood, slipping the key into his shackle and releasing his wrist. He held the key out to her as he inhaled. His fangs lowered and his eyes flickered black as they gazed at the gash on her arm. Blood flowed in thick, sticky rivulets up her arm. It coated her tank and jeans.

"Shep?" she said, taking a step back. He'd never lost control with her before, but he was injured when he'd been brought into the cell and she knew that made him hungry.

He closed his eyes and shook his head. Letting out a breath, he shoved the key toward her. She licked her lips. Inching forward, she plucked it out of his hand and darted to the wall.

Shep opened his eyes as she fumbled to undo her bindings. "I'll heal you."

"You think I'm going to drink your blood? No way!" She dropped her cuff to the floor. They'd done it before, but it was different. Blood sharing was intimate, erotic, and she so wasn't going down that road

again. Not here, not ever, especially with him.

"You're bleeding profusely. It's a distraction to me and a calling card to our friends." He pointed to the two unconscious men on the floor.

Abby wrinkled her nose. "They'll still be able to smell my blood," she said. "It's all over me." She motioned her good hand over her soiled top and jeans.

Shep eyed her for a moment before taking a step forward. "We don't have time to argue. You need to heal, and I need sustenance." His gaze darted to her arm as his eyes darkened and fangs lowered again.

"What?" she asked, stepping back until her back grazed against the cool concrete. What the hell was he saying? *He's going to bite me! What if he doesn't stop?*

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CHAPTER TWO

"I'm not going to bite you," Shep told her. At least he really hoped he wasn't. Her blood called to him. They didn't have time to argue or for him to suckle her like he wanted. Somehow he had to get her to see what he was saying without further arguing. "I need blood to function. I was injured before they captured me. If you'll allow me, I will clean your arm. My saliva can secrete a compound that will seal your injury while aiding in the healing process and stop the bleeding. But you need to trust me, because they'll only be out for a few more minutes." He pointed to the unconscious men on the floor for emphasis. "We don't have time to argue, Abby. I don't want to hurt you, but be ready just in case my hunger gets the best of me."

Abby cocked her head to the side as she studied him. She fisted the key between her fingers as she balled her hand, ready to strike. "Fine. But you do anything funny, I won't think twice about ramming this into your neck. Got it?"

Shep grinned. She was sassier than he remembered. "Got it. I don't think I'll lose control." He prayed he wouldn't. God help him if he hurt her. His belly grumbled loud enough for her to hear.

Abby stepped forward, offering her arm to him. He gripped it between his fingers and lifted it to his mouth. His tongue grazed over her arm, licking the euphoric liquid. She tasted like coppery berries with a hint of cinnamon. *Delicious*. Her pale skin was soft and he would have liked nothing better than to run his tongue over it all day. Another scent permeated the air. Sex. Was this turning her on? Good to know he wasn't the only one affected by their closeness. His jaw ached. His fangs begged to extend and prick her flesh, to taste more of her liquid heat. But he'd promised not to, and he wouldn't betray her – not again. He flicked his tongue over her wound, savoring the remnants of blood as it began to clot, forming a long scab over her creamy skin. Once every drop had been cleaned, he released her.

She took a step back, and stared at her arm. “I…I didn’t know vampires could heal like that.” Her fingers trailed over the scabs as her eyes widened.

“It’s not something we tell people about. Not quite as effective as drinking our blood, but also not as crude, right?”

She nodded.

“We should go,” Shep said. He rushed to the door and peered out before she could say anything. He turned to the right, then the left, checking to see if the coast was clear. No one was coming – yet.

He motioned for her to follow him as he stepped into the hall. The left looked like long passageways, whereas the right had sunlight filtering in from somewhere. Where there was light, there was a way out.

“This way.” He crept down the hall while listening for their *friends*. Nothing except for Abby creeping behind him, and he could barely hear her sneakers touch the cement. She was quiet. Better than some vampires he knew.

They continued down the hall, coming to a stop at a window. It was covered with dust and debris, but he could make out trees and water flowing along the edge of a forest. He flipped the locks off and pushed the glass out, using the long rod to hold it in place. It creaked as he locked it and he and Abby both turned, looking for someone to come barreling down the hall after them. No one was there for the moment.

“Ladies first,” he said, nudging her. “I’ll give you a boost up.” He laced his fingers together and squatted.

Abby put her foot in his palms and a hand on his shoulder, but instead of jumping up, she turned her head to look behind her. “I think someone’s coming.”

“All the more reason for us to hurry.” He cocked his head to the side. Footsteps listed down the hall. Probably someone checking to see what was taking the vampires so long. “Come on, Abby.”

Abby grasped the window. He lifted her as she hauled herself up and wiggled through the opening. She landed on her feet, whipping her head from side to side as Shep placed his hands on the cement

block. He pushed up and put both legs through, landing next to Abby in a squat.

“We’re at the abandoned prison,” Abby said as she smoothed a hand through her hair.

“How far from pack lands?”

“Around fifty miles. I didn’t realize they’d taken me so far.” She wrapped her arms around herself and shuddered while continuing to canvas the area.

He hadn’t realized they’d travelled so far for their prey. It was possible there were even more than six of them. They could figure out where the vampires’ hunting grounds were later, once they’d obtained a safe distance. “We should keep moving. I don’t see anyone, you?”

“No. We’ll have better cover in the trees. We should hurry before someone sees us.”

She took a step forward and Shep stopped her saying, “Not too fast. It wouldn’t surprise me if they have traps set out.” Abby frowned and opened her mouth, but Shep spoke again. “That’s how they got me. I was chasing one guy in a building when the floor gave out. I fell six floors into the basement.”

“You think they set a trap?” she asked.

“Yeah. I thought the broken down cardboard boxes on the floor were trash. They weren’t. It was deliberately placed to cover a perfectly circular hole wide enough for someone to fall through. They must know the police are on to them, as well as the supernatural community. They’re trying to make sure their pursuers don’t catch them. I bet they’ve increased their feeding ground, too. The larger the feeding ground the harder it is to track them, especially if there’s more than one. Each one probably has their own way they like to handle capturing their prey.”

Abby licked her lips and shuddered. “We should keep our eyes vigilant then.”

They made their way through the grass and into the trees. It was quiet – too quiet for his liking. The absence of birds and wildlife suggested that something was wrong. Abby seemed to notice it too, even if she wasn’t saying anything. Her eyes shifted around the forest,

and her hands remained in tight fists at her sides.

A glint of silver caught Shep's eye and he flung his arm out, nearly knocking her over in his effort to stop her. She cast her gaze to him, and he pointed to the ground near her foot.

Buried under the foliage was a metal stake with a rope attached to it. He followed the line to a tree where a camouflage net was in place, ready to swoop down and capture an unsuspecting person or animal.

"I think they are hunting more than just people," he said. He walked around to where a few twigs had broken off a bush, probably from some sort of scuffle. Tufts of brown hair lay on the ground, and a red splatter coated a few of the leaves. He inhaled the scent to be sure. "Deer."

"What makes a vampire do this?" Abby asked as she edged around the trap. "They seem to be eating anything they can get their hands on – viciously." She stopped to his right, where more blood smeared over the ground. The grass was smashed from a scuffle. "Hey, look!"

Shep hurried over to her and eyed the worn trail. It would be dangerous to follow it, but he wanted to know where it led. The tracks on it had to be fresh since they hadn't washed away with yesterday's rain.

Eyeing the woods behind him, Shep looked for movement. Nothing. "Let's follow it." He clutched Abby's elbow and continued to move through the woods.

"Well?" she asked, casting a quick glance his way before looking back to the ground. She wiggled her elbow free of his grasp and pumped her hands at her sides as they started to make their way up a hill.

Vampires had many secrets that they didn't share, and this was one of them. Shep cleared his throat. He owed her at least a partial answer. "When a vampire is first turned, it's important that someone teaches them how to feed without killing. There's usually accidents, and we have crews to help clean up the mess to keep our community safe, but with the right guidance, it shouldn't take longer than a month or two to gain control."

"So, no one has trained them? This seems like something more,"

she said.

She was right. In rare instances, the newly turned vampire's bloodlust overpowered them, turning them into a rabid monster that fed on everyone and everything it could get its hands on, including other vampires. He just didn't know how so many of them had come together. It was definitely something he needed to bring up to his council. They would want to know what was happening. The supernatural community went to great lengths to stay hidden from humans. It was the one thing all the species actually agreed on. These vampires could expose all supernatural creatures.

"I don't know," he answered. "I suggest we get out of here and regroup, I'll ask for reinforcements and then we'll come back."

"I'm sure the pack will seek retribution for my partner, Tom," she said, her voice dropping lower at the mention of the wolf's name.

"Were you close to him?" he asked, curious about the male that had been with her. He tried to place the name with the face from his time with the pack, but couldn't. Was she dating him – or anyone? It wasn't his business, and she was a *wolf and his ex*, but dammit, he wanted to know.

"We were friends, yes."

Friends, but nothing more. She could still have a mate back home. That's why her father had insisted they split. As a vampire, he wasn't a suitable mate. It was true; he couldn't give her the one thing a werewolf needed – a family.

He looked her over. No. She wasn't mated. She couldn't be because she was still his, but just because he felt that way didn't mean she did too. The urge to take her, claim her, rushed through him.

Get your head in the game!

"We will see that his death is avenged," he told her.

"Why do you care?" she asked with a huff as they began their way up a hill.

"No one deserves to die like that."

He offered her his hand to help her up a steep incline, but she brushed past it, using a rock to haul herself up instead. They reached the top of the incline, and Abby turned to stare down. "It doesn't look

like we're being followed."

"No, it doesn't. I would have thought they'd put up a bigger fight. Their feeding schedule seems quite demanding."

"Oh God. I didn't even think. Do you… do you think they have other people down there to feed from instead?" Her wide eyes met his as she hugged herself, rubbing her hands up and down her arms.

Shep scrubbed a hand over his face. "It's possible. In fact, it makes sense. We can't go back for them. We're outnumbered and still don't have any idea how many of them there are. It would be suicide." His stomach twisted. It'd never occurred to him that more people could have been locked in cells.

"I don't think we are far from town. My pack occasionally comes to the outlet malls here. There's a hotel nearby – we can keep watch from there until help arrives." She moved past him, making her way down the other side of the hill.

He wanted to tell her he didn't think renting a room was necessary. All of the disappearances happened at night when it was dark. Then again, spending the afternoon with her *alone* in a bedroom could have its advantages. *No. No. No.* He'd broke her heart once, and he wasn't going to do it again.

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CHAPTER THREE

Abby smoothed a hand over her tee as she looked in the mirror. A bruise was forming by her eye, and her split lip swelled. No wonder the front desk clerk had looked at her so strangely. At least she'd put on a clean shirt Shep had nabbed from a gas station before they'd booked a room. The clerk would have likely called the police given the amount of blood on her clothes.

She used her fingers to comb through her hair as best she could before finally giving up on the unruly mess and making her way out to the bedroom. Shep sat in a chair, his feet slung over the AC unit as he stared out the window.

"Anything?" she asked. They could see the path leading to the prison from here. It led straight to and from the town.

"No," he told her." I doubt they'll make a move until this evening. Vampires are nocturnal. I'd guess they take multiple victims at night and hold them in the cells to feed on throughout the day. We could both get some sleep." He nodded to the two double beds.

She shivered, following his gaze to the mattress. "A group of enforcers will be here by six," she said, reminding him of her conversation with her alpha. Thank goodness they wouldn't be alone too long. Still, that was over eight hours from now. Long enough to… *no, don't you even go there, Abby.*

"The vampire council has spoken with your alpha. We are coordinating the first vampire-wolf cooperative assignment in decades," he said, not taking his eyes from the window. "Looks like we're sanctioned to work together again."

"Except this time we're hunting vampires not wolves," she said, trailing her fingers over the long scab on her arm. Heat swelled in her belly as she remembered the way his tongue had felt against her skin. Heat stirred in her core as her cheeks blazed. She cleared her throat. "I guess that's one thing we have in common, we both have crazies

amongst our species."

"I'm sure we have more in common than that," Shep said.

Abby leveled her gaze at him. Anger and arousal coursed through her. "Funny, that's not what you said last time."

Shep sighed. "I would have thought you'd be settled down with a mate by now, maybe even have a few kids," he said, finally swinging around to look at her.

Abby licked her lips, willing her heated body to calm. "Why would you think that?"

His eyebrows lifted as he stared. She already knew the answer to her question. It was what the pack expected. Hell, it was practically law.

"I have no interest in mating, but then again, you already knew that. I'm an enforcer. That's my role in the pack," she told him, though she wasn't sure why. It really wasn't any of his business.

"Why? Why not settle down?" he asked, staring up at her from his chair for a moment before turning back to the window.

Abby flung her arms out to the side, clapping her palms on her thighs. "I've always been a bit of a tomboy. I enjoy fighting, roughhousing, and doing unladylike things, as my mom puts it. Having kids and a family just aren't something I'm interested in. I wasn't interested in that twenty-three years ago, and I'm not interested now." Her dad thought she'd come around – eventually, which was why he'd appeased her request. Werewolves lived to be several hundred years old, and she was young. She had no intentions of changing her mind. She enjoyed her freedom and she knew what she wanted and refused to be swayed.

"I didn't realize your father was so understanding," Shep said.

"I wouldn't call him understanding. He just doesn't want to see his only daughter leave the pack," she said with a shrug.

Shep turned to her again. "You'd really leave the pack?"

Abby met his gaze with a smile. "Yeah. I did once after we broke up." She dragged her hand through her hair and looked away. "He pressed me too far, so I left. I was gone for almost a year until my mom got sick. That's the only reason I went back. He promised me I

could be an enforcer for as long as I liked if I stayed, so I did."

"Oh?"

"He'd rather keep me around, and I think he finally realized how stubborn I could be." Modern society had helped a lot with the way the pack did things. Most women still chose to pick a mate and settle down, popping out a kid or two every year or two.

"I guess I expected you to be mated off by now," he said quietly.

"Why?"

Shep opened and closed his mouth before returning his gaze to the window. "That's how the pack works. You're smart, pretty, and the alpha's daughter. Any wolf would be lucky to have you. I thought… never mind."

Abby rolled her eyes and crinkled her nose. "You know I don't follow rules. Why do you think I would change?"

He didn't answer, only shook his head.

They were quiet for several long moments before he finally broke the silence as he stood. "I'm going to bed. I've been up too long, and it'll be a long night catching these bastards."

She licked her lips and nodded.

"You should get some rest too," Shep said. "I'll set the alarm. I doubt they'll come out until dusk."

"How can you be so sure?" she asked, cocking her head to the side.

"Other than being nocturnal, it's easier to do what they're doing at night when people are sleeping and aren't out and about," he said with a yawn. "Trust me. Dusk." He flopped down onto the bed, causing it to squeak and bounce under his weight.

Abby crossed her arms over her chest and watched as he peeled his shirt off, revealing his sculpted torso. She licked her lips, wondering what it'd be like to touch him again. Would he still feel the same after so many years? Sweat beaded on her brow, and she squirmed in her chair. *What the hell is wrong with me? He's not interested. And neither am I!*

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CHAPTER FOUR

Shep jolted awake to a loud wail. He shot up and tossed the covers off him. Blinking, he tried to place where he was. *Hotel. Abby. Crazy vampires.* His gaze drifted to the empty bed next to him. The sheets were tousled, clearly having been slept in, but there was no sign of Abby. Had she fled? He doubted it. Perhaps she'd gone for a bite to eat, which he would need to do too. First, a shower.

He cast a glance at the alarm clock. It was just a little after four. Since it was summer, there was still plenty of time until dusk. His reinforcements and Abby's pack would be here in the next few hours, then they could come up with their plan of attack.

The hotel door clicked and popped open, drawing his gaze to the entry. Abby stepped in, her hair smoothed back in a messy do. Her eyes met his as she set the keycard on the AC unit. She was wearing a sports bra and skintight pants.

"I didn't think you'd be up yet," she said, crossing her arms over her middle as if she were trying to hide her exposed skin.

"Did you sleep at all?"

She shrugged. "I couldn't."

His eyes swept over her. "So… you've been out running all day?"

"Yeah."

"Abby? We have a lot going on tonight." What was she thinking? She needed to have a clear head. What they were doing tonight was dangerous.

"I'm ready. Running on foot and paws cleared my mind," she told him.

"You went back into the woods? Alone?" he asked as anger flared inside him. "Do you have any idea how dangerous that was?"

"Relax. I scouted the perimeter without getting too close."

"That was reckless," he said. He got out of bed and grabbed her arm, jerking her to him. "You can't do things like that."

She wrenched her arm free. “You don’t get to worry about me,” she hissed. “You lost that right a long time ago.”

She was right and they both knew it. “Abby, I don’t want anything to happen to you. I don’t want to see you get hurt.”

Abby snorted and rolled her eyes. “Yeah? You have a funny way of showing it. As I remember, you did a pretty good job hurting me before.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “And I never hurt you physically. There’s a big difference.”

She looked away and then back to him. “Why did you do it? Why did you leave?” She crossed her arms over her chest and set her jaw, clearly having no intention of backing down.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“It does to me,” she said, meeting his gaze.

“It’s been years, Abby.”

“I know it was my father who asked you to do it – to end things. I never thought you could be paid off. I thought you were better than that. I thought I meant more to you than that.” Her voice wavered with emotion. “That’s what hurt the most. That’s why I left home.”

He could still remember the days leading up to their breakup clearly – especially the day her father had come to him and urged him to end things. “I was thinking of you, Abby.”

She narrowed her eyes and sighed.

“I was. You’re alive. You can have children, a family, anything. I can’t give you any of that. It wasn’t fair for me to keep you from *living*. Not to mention, I’m dangerous. I have excellent control, but the urge to bite you and drink my fill of your blood is always there.”

“Don’t lie to me. We both know your control is too good for you to hurt me. You could never hurt me because you care.”

He sighed. She was right, and he wasn’t going to argue with her on that point.

“You don’t get it, do you?” she began again. “You made me feel alive. I never wanted to settle and have a family. I still don’t. Maybe I’m weird, and I defy every single thing that a female wolf is, but it’s who I am. I can’t change it, and I shouldn’t be forced to.”

“Abby – ”

“Don’t, Shep. I’m going to get cleaned up. Just forget it. Forget everything.” She turned on her heel, but he caught her arm and hauled her back to him.

“I thought I was doing right by you, Abby. I never meant to hurt you. If I’d known…” He trailed off. If he’d known she’d still be unmated years later, he would have never broken things off with her. “I’m sorry, Abby. I truly thought I was doing what was best for you.”

She ran a hand through her hair and blinked, looking up at him. Tears shone in her eyes. “Why aren’t I normal? Why am I so drawn to you? Why don’t I want the things that any female wolf would love to have?”

Shep gulped, reaching out to touch her cheek. “You are normal.” It was time to tell her the truth, he couldn’t fight it any longer. “Before I was turned into a vampire, I was a werewolf. Our two wolves are destined to be together.” Even in a wolf’s long life, very few met their soul mate. Most settled and found happiness with a wolf from their pack.

“What?” she asked, blinking.

“It’s true. I’ve known it from the moment I saw you. Part of me must still be a wolf on some level.”

“But you’re not a wolf anymore,” she said quietly. “You’re a vampire.”

He nodded. “I can’t change that. I was turned against my will, but it doesn’t change how I feel about you, Abby. It never will. I love you.” He caressed her cheek with his thumb, flooded with relief at finally getting the words out.

“Shep.” She took a step forward.

He gazed into her eyes, searching for forgiveness, acceptance, anything. Her lips parted and her mouth moved towards his, giving him all the permission he needed.

Shep swept her into his arms, capturing her lips with his. She let out a contented sigh, allowing him to slip his tongue into her mouth and glide it over hers. They melded together, tasting each other for the first time in years. She was exactly as he remembered, hard yet

soft in all the right spots.

His hands went to her hips, sliding lower to grip her firm ass. He lifted her up and she wrapped her legs around him, pulling him exactly where he wanted to be. His cock throbbed as it rubbed against her thin workout pants from the confines of his boxers. It had been too long since he'd felt her writhing beneath him, and it took every ounce of strength he had to keep from peeling her clothes off and taking her this instant.

Shep peppered open-mouthed kisses over her cheeks to her neck and collarbone as his hands went to her sports bra. He rolled it up, exposing her pert breasts, pulling back only long enough to remove it completely. His mouth found her nipple, gently sucking on the hard bud.

Abby groaned, arching into him while running her hands through his hair. He laved her breasts for a moment, taking care to give each one attention before, moving his kisses to her navel. She swayed in his embrace as his mouth hovered over the waist of her pants.

Gently, he pushed her backwards until she hit the bed. Abby sat, then lay back. Shep climbed on the bed, using his knees to push her legs further apart. His fingers went to her pants, hooking around them so he could strip them off. He gazed down at her perfect body, taking her in. There were a few new scars that he hadn't seen before, but otherwise she was exactly as he remembered. *Perfect.*

Shep lowered himself down as Abby lifted her hips, placing her thighs on both sides of his head. Her fingers threaded through his hair as he blew on her core. His tongue darted out, licking its way up her silky folds. She tasted amazing.

He placed a finger on her clit as he thrust his tongue into her sopping core. Abby cried out, pulling his hair as she squirmed. He placed a hand on her hips to hold her still, so he could have his way with her. The louder she moaned, the harder and faster he flicked his tongue against her center. Her hands left his hair and fisted the sheets, drawing them tightly into her palms as she thrust her hips against his face.

Shep chuckled at her impatience, loving that after all this time he

still could get her all wound up. He pressed against her clit at the same time he swiped his tongue over her core. Abby cried out, tensing as her hips bucked up. Her sweet juices flowed into his mouth and he lapped up her release while she panted and came down from her high. He wasn't anywhere done with her yet.

Shep stood from the bed, aware that Abby was watching him through hooded eyes. He grinned as he rolled his boxers down and stepped out of them. His cock throbbed, aching to be inside Abby's tight, wet heat.

Abby licked her lips as she sat up. Her hand reached out, curling around his shaft. She pumped up and down before leaning forward to lick the tip of his length. He shuddered at the contact and let out a breath. Abby always knew exactly how to touch him to set him on fire.

He watched as she opened her mouth and took his cock in. His eyes rolled shut and he growled as she moved up and down his shaft.

Shep pushed her head back gently, wanting to be inside her when he came. First she was going to come again. He wanted to hear her scream his name – wanted the whole damn hotel to hear his name on her lips.

Abby lay back, cupping her breast with one hand as she spread herself before him. He let his eyes roam over her as he nestled between her thighs. She was truly exquisite.

She wiggled her hips, lifting them off the mattress to touch the tip of his cock. "Please, Shep. It's been so long."

Shep pushed his cock against her entrance, careful not to penetrate yet. "I've dreamed about having you again so many times," he told her.

Abby peered up at him, her breath coming in shallow pants. He leaned down and captured one of her pebbled nipples with his mouth, sucking on the tight bud as he slid all the way into her. Abby gasped, arching her back, drawing him deeper. Her legs went to his waist and locked around the small of his back as he set a steady pace.

Shep found Abby's lips, thrusting his tongue into her mouth, capturing her cries of pleasure. He ran his hands up and down her

sides, feeling the smoothness of her skin beneath him.

A chuckle escaped his lips when she unlocked her legs, bucked up, and rolled him to his back. Abby always did like to have a turn to be in charge. She splayed her hands over his chest as she rotated her hips in a circle. Her eyes closed as she got lost in the rhythm of her movements.

Shep clasped her hips as he pushed up into her, watching as her face changed depending on where and how he moved. Her tongue darted out to wet her lips before she clenched it between her teeth. He grinned, feeling her inner walls begin to tighten around his cock.

"Oh God, Shep," she said as her movements became erratic.

"Let go, Abby."

Shep grinded against her, loving the way that her core tightened around his cock. He was close, but he couldn't come until she did. He refused.

"Shep," she said her voice growing louder. "Shep."

Her juices flowed over his cock as she screamed his name.

Shep flipped them over, and he set a quick pace, hoping to draw out her orgasm even more. She fisted the sheets as she chanted his name. Her head turned to the side.

"Do it, please," she panted, showing him her neck.

He gritted his teeth as his fangs emerged. His tongue darted out, licking the glistening sweat from her neck before he punctured her flesh. She screamed louder, her body shuddering beneath his as he suckled. The sweet taste of her blood sent him spiraling over the edge, and he buried himself to the hilt as his orgasm raced through. His fangs retracted, and he licked the tiny puncture wounds until they all but disappeared.

He pitched forward onto her, pressing his forehead against hers. "I love you, Abby," he told her as he placed tender kisses on her cheeks and lips. "When this is over I want you to come with me. We can be a team – work together. The vampire council is always looking for new members. I'm sure they'd be thrilled I finally found a partner." They didn't like anyone to work alone, but they wouldn't force him to partner up either. It might not thrill them that his partner was a

werewolf, but he and Abby made a great team.

She panted and closed her eyes without saying anything, but at least his offer and intentions were out in the open. He knew he'd hurt her, but they were on the right path now. Everything was going to be okay. Reinforcements would come, they'd nab the psycho vamps, and then he and Abby…

What if she didn't come? He closed his eyes and let out a long breath, praying that he could make things right with her.

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CHAPTER FIVE

Abby crossed her arms over her chest as she listened to her father give instructions to all the wolves. He'd barely said two words to her since he'd arrived. Could he smell Shep on her even though they'd both showered before meeting up with their reinforcements? Did she care? No, she didn't.

He'd tried to control her life for far too long. It was time for her to take charge. Shep was what she wanted. Maybe she didn't crave things normal female wolves did because her mate had been turned into something else. It was possible, right? There was one thing she was sure of, and that was her love for him. A piece of her had been missing the past twenty-three years, and she wasn't going to lose it again.

Her father's voice broke through her thoughts. "Abby, you're going to take point here."

She followed his finger to a spot on the map. Her mouth opened, ready to protest.

"With all due respect, Sir," Shep began. "I think given Abby's strengths she'd be better off inside the compound."

Abby gritted her teeth. She was strong, fast, and won most sparring matches against the other enforcers, yet her dad still shielded her. Of course he would give her a point just inside of town, in case someone broke through the line of vampires and wolves. That wasn't going to happen.

"With all due respect, Abby is *my* enforcer. You worry about your vampires and I'll worry about my wolves," her father said. He was speaking to Shep, but his eyes bored into her.

Shep sighed and inclined his head. Abby kept her mouth shut, not wanting to fight about this. Let him place her on the outside. It hurt, but she'd made up her mind. When this was over, she was going with Shep. She wouldn't have to take orders from her alpha ever again.

“All right,” her father said loudly. “Everyone knows where they are supposed to be. The sun will be setting within the hour. Let’s get in place so we can get these bastards before they move out.”

The room came alive with chatter as everyone filed out. Abby stayed rooted in her spot. So did Shep and her father.

Her father looked from her to Shep, then back again. “I’ve given you your orders, Abby. I expect you to follow them.” He held her gaze a moment longer before turning to Shep. “Your men are waiting for you.”

Shep opened his mouth, but Abby spoke up, “Be careful out there, Shep. I’ll see you after we finish this.”

He let out a breath, meeting her gaze for a moment before leaving the hotel room.

“What are you doing?” her father questioned.

“Following my heart,” she said. “Don’t try to stop me this time, Dad.”

He swallowed and looked away. “I want you to be happy.”

“Then let me be happy,” she said, walking toward him.

He held up his hand, and she stopped. “The men are waiting for me. I trust you to follow orders, Abby. Are we clear?”

“Crystal,” she said, letting her shoulders slouch. She knew when to pick her battles, and she was saving her strength for the bigger one coming up.

“Good.” With that, her father turned on his heel and exited the room.

Abby sucked in a breath and let it out. Her job might suck, but she was still going to do it.

***

Shep placed his back against the concrete wall. There were eight vampires and ten werewolves. They’d split into groups of three to surround the entire complex.

He wished Abby was here to have his back, but there would be plenty of time to make up for it in the future. She was going to come with him, he was sure of it. He’d seen it in her eyes.

A wolf howled and Shep turned, nodding to the two men with him.

That was their cue that everyone was in place. He grasped the handle of the door to his right and twisted, breaking the lock. It creaked loudly as it slid open.

He held his breath, waiting to hear movement. Nothing. The coast was clear for the moment. He motioned the men to follow him as he darted into the building.

The stagnant air nearly took his breath away, and he gagged against the offensive odor. It stunk like rotting flesh. How many bodies did they have piled up in here? He didn't know how anyone could handle the stench.

Soft sobs drew his attention ahead of him. He raced forward, staying light on his feet to keep from attracting attention. Moments later he stopped in front of a cell. A girl, barely a teen, sat in the corner crying.

"Hey," he whispered. "It's okay. We're going to get you out."

The girl looked up. Tears rolled in rivulets down her dirt stained face. Her bottom lip trembled.

Shep took a step closer and then paused. The cell was set up similar to how it had been for him and Abby. Only there wasn't another *living* person in the cell. The mutilated body had been ripped to shreds. It was so contorted he doubted even the best doctor would be able to ID the victim. His stomach twisted. He was a vampire who had seen a lot of shit, but this was something new.

He swallowed and placed his hand on the door lock, wrenching it loose. The girl whimpered as he approached, but he didn't slow his pace. He picked up the cuff and grunted as he worked to pry it off. The metal stretched, parting slightly. Sweat beaded on his brow from the effort until finally the shackle gave way.

He let the cuff drop to the floor and offered his hand to the young girl. She blinked at him, trembling.

"It's okay. You're safe." He turned to Marc, one of the men with him. "Get her out of here. Take her to Abby."

Marc nodded as he swooped the girl into his arms and dashed out of the compound.

"We need to keep moving," he said to his other companion, Chuck.

“Agreed.” Chuck covered his mouth and nose as they moved past the decaying corpse.

“I’ve never seen anything like this before,” Chuck said.

“Me either. We can’t afford to let any of them escape.”

“Do you think we’ll find out why they went insane?” Chuck asked as they moved back into the hallway.

“I have a theory,” Shep said, glancing Chuck’s way then back down the hall. “Someone in charge is psychotic, and they are deliberately making vampires like this. I’m not sure how they’re doing it, but it’s the only thing that makes sense. Even newly turned vampires with no control wouldn’t behave like this.”

“I suppose anything is possible,” Chuck agreed.

A pained yowl ripped through the air, followed by the smell of blood. Shep’s fangs elongated and his eyes flicked to black. The wolves were in trouble.

***

Abby’s heart pinched as the familiar howl cried out through the night. *Dad. No.*

She ripped her shirt off and slid her jeans down, and then dropped to her hands and knees in the grass. Her bones crunched as they snapped, realigning to shape her wolf form. Hair sprouted on her arms and legs as her body shrunk to its new shape. She blinked, her yellow eyes seeing more sharply and clearly in the darkness than her human ones.

Fully transitioned, she sprung forward, racing through the brush to the abandoned prison. Her legs and lungs burned while her heart thundered in her chest. She had to get there in time. She and her father might have their differences, but he was still her alpha – her father.

Abby charged through the forest, nearly missing a trap. She didn’t slow, instead pushing her legs faster. The trees whirled as she passed them until the building came into view. There were no lights on, leaving it pitch-black. It was quiet – too quiet.

She dropped to her belly and crawled through the grass as she snaked her way to the compound. Movement caught her. A single

vampire raced across the field. She didn't recognize him.

Abby narrowed her eyes, preparing to pounce. *Just come a little closer.*

She lunged, paws outstretched as she dragged her prey to the ground. Growling, she clasped her canines around the vampire's throat and dug her paws into his chest. Blood coated her paws and seeped into her mouth, but she didn't stop squeezing until the man stopped thrashing.

He was unconscious for the moment. She narrowed her eyes as she spat the foul tasting blood from her mouth. None of these monsters could be allowed to escape. She scanned the area, looking for anything she could use as a stake. A long, thick branch caught her eye. It would have to do.

She trotted to it, picked it up with her teeth and maneuvered it in her mouth until she was standing over the vampire with the pointy end aimed at his heart. Thrusting the stick down with all her might, she grunted as it plunged through his skin and pierced his heart. His skin greyed, then started to flake and blow away with the soft breeze.

Abby hopped off and trotted forward, listening for sounds of movement. She could hear signs of a struggle inside the compound. Letting her ears guide her movements, she picked up her pace and entered the compound.

Her eyes watered, and she coughed as the stench hit her. She swallowed, pinned her ears back, and continued forward. Her father, her pack, and Shep were in here, and she was going to find them.

The sounds of the scuffle grew louder. Shouts, howls, and snarls ricocheted off the walls. Abby followed the sounds until she came into a room with an overhang. On the bottom, the pack and all the vampires were fighting.

From the looks of things, it wasn't going well for her group. Three vampires had cornered her father, and Shep was fist-fighting two others. The rest of their people were in just as much trouble. There were far more rabid vampires than they'd realized. Her eyes darted around, trying to find a way down. Stairs were on the far end.

Her father howled as a vampire clamped its mouth around his hind

leg. There wasn't time to go around. Abby darted forward. Thankful yet again for being so small, she jumped through the bars of the guardrail. She flew to the level below, landing on top of one of the vampires attacking her father.

Snarling, she sunk her canines into his leg and dragged him away while shaking her head, trying to inflict as much damage as possible. She lifted her paws up and swiped them down the vampire's back. He howled in pain as he writhed beneath her. She dug her nails deeper, only stopping when the vampire passed out. There wasn't time to stake him now, she had to stop the other vampires first.

She narrowed her eyes. Her father had regained the upper hand, so she moved on. A vampire was about to attack one of their allies, so she lunged and tackled him. She sank her teeth into his neck and wrenched his head to the side, letting out a sigh when the bone snapped.

The fight ended quickly. Their allies used stakes to finish off their enemy. Abby watched, still in her wolf form, as each body turned to ash. It was over. Now the next chapter of her life could begin.

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CHAPTER SIX

"How are you feeling?" Abby asked her dad as he hobbled to the car.

"I've been better." His smile didn't quite meet his eyes. "You disobeyed my orders," he said with a sigh. "I'm glad you did. You really are good at being an enforcer."

"Thanks." She grinned as her heart swelled. It was nice to hear him acknowledge how hard she worked.

"You love him, don't you?"

"I'm going with him," she said, meeting and holding his gaze. "He makes me feel complete."

"I thought you'd be happy if he left, that you'd move on, but you never did. I just want you to be happy, Abby. If Shep is it for you, then you have my blessing."

Abby lunged forward, wrapping her arms around him to pull him into a hug. "Thanks, Dad."

He coughed, wheezing at her tight embrace. She pulled back, and he chuckled. "Don't be afraid to come home. You'll always be welcome on pack lands."

"Thank you." She kissed him on the cheek.

***

Shep paced back and forth, watching Abby speak to her dad. Even with vampire hearing, he couldn't hear what was being said over the roar of the car engine and the traffic on the street.

He'd like to think she was coming with him, but he wasn't sure. She'd never said she intended to. But how could she not after this afternoon?

The car door shut, and he stood straight. Abby looked left and right before jogging across the street. She grinned as she stopped a few feet in front of him.

"Where are all your guys?" she asked.

“I sent them home.”

She shifted back and forth on her feet. “What are your plans?”

“I have to give my report on the situation to the council. Then I’m off to my next assignment,” he said, swallowing.

Abby licked her lips. “Is your offer still open?”

A smile tugged at his lips. “Always.”

“Good. I’d like to officially join your team.” She took a step forward and stood on her tiptoes. “I love you, Shep.”

“I love you too.” He captured her lips with his as he wrapped his arm around her. This was the start of something new and fresh, and he couldn’t wait to start this new adventure – together.

Thanks for reading The Truce. I hope you enjoyed the story. You may also like Vanished.

Zak should kill the beautiful witch that betrayed him, but he can’t bring himself to do it. All he wants is a chance to get to know the bewitching beauty. His mother maliciously grants his wish when she casts a spell that sends them both into the past.

Cadence is weary of Zak. Her coven is at war with his vampire clan. When they end up stuck in the past, she has no choice but to trust the vampire in this strange time. Enemies from Zak’s past surface, posing a threat to them, and forcing her to tap into her unstable magic.

As they unravel truths, they learn more dangers lurk in the present. Both are determined to get home, but if they succeed, then whatever it is she feels for Zak she’ll have to extinguish. They can never be together, but that doesn’t mean it’s easy to resist his charms.

Vanished is available at your favorite online retailer.

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Bethany Shaw lives in Ohio with her husband and two kids. Writing has always been her passion and she loves sharing her stories with readers. When she isn't writing, she is spending time with her family enjoying bike rides, bowling, and board games.

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Immortal Hearts by Muffy Wilson

"This is the story about my death.
It is not as it should be but as it is.
It is not how I expected but, in the end, how I wanted.
It is not too soon but sooner than I thought for my years.
What it is?
It is perfect.
I am the sun, the wind, the stars in your eyes as you gaze into the moonlit heavens.
I am you, with you, in you—under your skin.
I reside in your heart.
And yet, is it not as it should be because it is our destiny.
It is our hearts, eternally entwined.
It is us—Immortal.
I am one with the night.
I am one with my love.
The platinum orb rose slowly above the burning, flaming horizon.
Like the moon, I am refreshed, now, in the shadows, adorned by diamonds and surrounded by glittering, shooting madness.
The sun so loves the moon that it dies each sunset that the moon may rise another night to honor the darkness.
I blossom as the day withers and fades into the black satin folds of the moon's embrace.
My joy ignites as the stars unveil their jewel-like splendor.
Inevitably, a midnight tear bids a love so light in darkness adieu with the fall of the morning moon to welcome her fiery radiance anew.
And I am born to the night with, and by, my love.
Adieu ~"

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And yet, is it not as it should be because it is our destiny.
It is our hearts, eternally entwined.
It is us—Immortal.

Between the sighs and soft lavender scented folds of gray mist, your face emerges above me. You descend upon my closed eyes, kissing each eyelid with the soft lightness of a butterfly. I see you smile somewhere in the distance and your breath caresses my neck on the soft skin you always loved to taste.

Tenderly, fingertips balanced in the air, you trace the rounded form that is my face, down my shoulders and to my breasts. The magnetic heat from your palms announces the arrival of your loving touch to the welcome eagerness of my nipples.

“Touch me,” I whisper in a sigh.

Suspended in my embrace, my fingers weave a gentle hold in your familiar hair, still wet from the bath. Droplets run along the auburn curls that crown your head and fall upon my cheek. You kiss them dry

as I slowly wake from the gray beyond.

Emerging from my dream on unforgiving wings, I realize you are gone. It is the tears that join me nightly on my cheeks that I mistake for your kisses. It is the heat of my own forlorn desire for you that awakens the passion in my breast.

Again, you leave me for yet another night.

I sat up in bed and glanced to the empty expanse beside me and ran my palm along the sheets. The undisturbed linens where your body should be were cold and I realize the heartless truth of your absence—you will never return. Not in this lifetime.

I cried myself to exhaustion as I had done so many nights since your presumed death. I think it might have been easier to accept had your body been found, but it was not. You and Carey went to ready the boat for the fishing season; you loved to fish. How the boat exploded during routine maintenance remains a mystery. I hated that boat—hated the water. It was always taking you from me, and now the final deed was done. The fire in the warehouse burned so intensely, nothing was found but your wedding ring beneath the remains of the smoking ash and sodden rubble. It was an image burned into my mind's eye that left me sad and weak with longing… if for nothing more than your body to claim your destiny. If I could accept your departure, and I could believe your death was real, perhaps I could mourn for my loss and your all consuming destiny.

But, I have little to comfort me. I cry for myself.

I miss you. In the truth of this separation, it is not your kiss that brings me alive in my dreams. It is not your breath of passion on my neck that heats me and flames my desire. Your lips on my flesh do not ignite my fervor. Nor does the magnetic rhapsody of your gaze draw me into your love.

I miss you. The tender touch of your hand is not the key to my ecstasy. Your insistent but gentle embrace holds not the fire of my ardor. The raw and yearning aroma of your eagerness seduces but does unlock my heart.

I miss you. It is the soft whisper of your love in my ear, the gentle wave of your excitement, the murmur of your desires in the folds of

my trembling flesh that unleash the throes of my passion.

I will miss your words. The words of your world touch me. When you speak, you kiss my heart and ignite my soul. You write of passion that releases our spirit giving flight to our essence. It is that essence which brings me joy; it is in that aerial core we share a private journey—our journey.

I will miss our us, our oneness, the embrace of love in our words. The long cavernous expanse before me is at once not distance, nor love, but the separation of truth.

Our truth.

Our love.

Our us.

Your words animated our gift to one another; the excitement of your daily discoveries shared over a candlelit dinner was my singular life inspiration. Your heart beat in my chest. Your breath filled my lungs. Your pulse fed me life.

Oh, truth is I will so miss you…

I swung my feet to the floor and sat to wipe the tears from my cheeks. They were not the same tears I mistook for the showered droplets of water on my face from your freshly shampooed hair, or the eager, loving kisses from your tender lips.

I stood to go get a drink of water and walked down the long hallway to the bathroom sink.

Feigning a strength I did not possess, unwavering, I ran my fingers nonchalantly along the wall as I walked past the door to your closet in the hall.

It was nothing more now than a threshold to the past.

I knew...

I couldn't live in the past... I couldn't breathe without you.

I couldn't exist in the lost and lonely days but... I wouldn't survive without them.

I couldn't welcome today with the memories of our love cinching an aching grip around my heart.

How could I live without your love to fold around my passion and desire?

Drawn irresistibly, weakened finally, to the door of your closet, I stopped. Was that the rustle of you dressing, the smell of your cologne and the soft resonant hum of your favorite song escaping your throat as you shaved? I ached for you and pressed my body against the door. The cool partition which separated me from my you, from our love, from the crushing truth, seared my yearning flesh and burned my heart.

There is no life without you: no heartbeat, no air connecting the tethered thoughts between us.

Oh, God, please bring him back or take me with him, into his eternal embrace.

I cried quietly…

…please don't leave me.

What will I do now that you are gone?

In a life without you, I am as good as dead myself…

***

The next morning, I awoke on the soft carpet in the hallway at the foot of your closet door. My cheeks were stained and crusted with dried tears. I no longer heard the gentle rustling of you dressing. No longer did the tantalizing aroma of your aftershave draw me into your arms, and the low, resonant sound of your throaty humming was replaced by the bustling sounds of commute traffic outside the bedroom window mere feet away.

Life went innocently on in a world gone harsh and barren without you.

I wanted to scream that you were dead—gone—plucked out of my life like a twisted joke gone awry that could not be undone.

But, instead, I rolled over onto my back and stared at the ceiling, the rhythmic monotony of the traffic sending me back into the black abyss of dream-sleep. In this suspended lull, I dreamt of you again, just like yesterday… and the day before… and the day before that. There was no escaping the destiny of loss. Every day since your departure has been the same torturous ordeal.

And then, from the clearing, I saw you smiling at me in the distance. You were surrounded in gray mist, suspended in an ethereal cloud floating towards me, your arms outstretched in a waiting embrace. I could see my fingertips reaching for you in return as you drifted slowly away.

"No, please, don't go—don't leave me again," I screamed into the bleak silence, but my voice was mute. Surely, you must hear me. Surely, you don't want to go. You can't possibly want me to be alone again… "I thought you loved me."

"I do…"

And then you were gone. I woke to your absence and the persistent sound of the doorbell. I collected my wits about me and stood in the hallway. Still in your nightshirt, I swiveled to my closet door, opened it and grabbed my pink robe as I turned to answer the front door.

After I put the robe on, I tightened the sash and released the locks on the door, except for the security door chain guard.

"Who is it?"

"The police, Miss Baylord."

"What do you want?" I opened the door and asked through the chained crack.

"I'd like to ask you a few questions about your husband's disappearance."

"May I see some identification, please?"

"Yes, ma'am, of course." The detective produced his leather billfold with his ID and gold badge.

I slipped my small hand through the opening, took the billfold and examined it closely.

"I think you will find everything in order."

"Do you have a business card, Detective?"

"Why, yes, I do. Would you like one?"

"Yes, please."

After I took the card, I dropped it into the pocket of my terrycloth robe and returned the detective's wallet to him under the chain through the door. I closed the door and released the chain from the channel.

I swung the door wide and gestured to the detective to enter while I walked to the center of my living room. I turned to look at the detective and gestured for him to be seated. He was not a big man, nor was he a small man but he was impressive in a rumpled sort of way. It was off-putting. He had a very nice camel cashmere coat on over a charcoal gray pinstriped suit. His face was serious and shadowed with the beginnings of a rustic, uneven beard. It looked as though it had been a while since his last shave.

For the first time since your disappearance, my darling, I noticed how unkempt our home had become. The room was once warm, with appealing modern décor and mid-century furniture. Lavish floor to ceiling windows framed an expansive view of downtown and the waterfront. Now, it was a dark room, hidden behind heavy drawn curtains and unused furniture. A room once full of laughter that celebrated life, music and the arts languished in the gloom, more mausoleum than home.

I knew the walls were painted a light and elegant linen, but they appeared gray and lifeless, the same as I felt. It smelled of stale, dark air gripped by a heavy sadness, thick cigarette smoke and sour coffee. The only things missing were half emptied take-out food containers of wilted Chinese, and crusted hard pizza in greasy boxes with curled ends.

I collected the musty comforter and pillow off the sofa and sat as I reached for my cigarettes and lighter. I was too empty to care what our once perfect home looked like to the detective.

“Yes, Detective Richard French?” I read from the business card and took a long, painful draw on my Marlboro. The smoke curled from my lips, billowing into the room to join the stagnant cloud pressed against the ceiling. “What do you want?”

“Lisbet? Lisbet Baylord?”

“You know that. What is it you think you *don’t* know already?”

“Can you tell me what happened the day your husband disappeared?”

“I can, but I won’t. You have all that. I have spoken to the police on numerous occasions, filed a statement with the insurance company,

and have been interviewed by the NewsPress. You already know as much as I do. Why don't you tell me what *you* know that I don't?"

"Pardon me, Miss Baylord?"

"*Mrs* Baylord to you, Detective."

"Mrs Baylord, I know how difficult this must be for you…"

"Do you, Detective? Has someone you made love to in the morning been incinerated in the afternoon—plucked out of your life in an instant by an exploding thirty-six-foot boat, too?"

"No, no. Nothing like that. But, I have lost loved ones. I don't pretend to know what you are going through, Ms Baylord…"

"Then don't, Detective."

"…and I am so sorry for your loss, but often, after a period of time —a period of self-reflection—we tend to ask ourselves a lot of questions. Sometimes we come up with answers; and, sometimes those answers help the police figure out what happened. We have to try to find out. There is no body; the boat is essentially gone. There is no evidence to prove anything, one way or the other. I am sure you know this. I am sure you must have questions, too, and want answers. Perhaps you can help me help you."

"I am sorry, Detective. I don't mean to be rude, but I don't give a fuck about your help. I don't need it. I don't have any questions. I don't have any answers. I don't have a husband or a boat. I don't have a life, love or children… and, I don't have any fucks to give. You know everything I know. How about you giving me some answers? How about you telling me something I don't already know."

And with that, I began to cry.

The detective sat silently, for a long time, and watched my cigarette burn down and out in the overfilled ashtray on the cluttered coffee table. He sat quietly for as long as it took for me to stop crying. I found his presence comforting. He did not move to console me, but left me to my wailing torture. I agonized for my lost love. I rose and padded barefooted to the bathroom. In what seemed like a long while later, I returned to the living room and the detective. I had washed my face, brushed my teeth and combed my hair for the first time since I didn't know when.

“I’m sorry, Detective.”

“I understand, Ms Baylord. My wife, Jane, died of cancer two years ago. Married for what would have been twenty years last month, so I understand the gripping pain of loss; but unlike you, I had my good-byes. I don’t know what’s easier, not that either way is. One way is in an instant, before your next breath, and the other is agonizingly slow, drawn out and painful. Death comes to us all, one way or another, Ms Baylord. I am sorry to intrude.”

“Lisbet. Call me Lisbet.”

“Yes, ma’am… Lisbet.”

“I am sorry about your wife, Detective. Do you have children?”

“Yes, ma’a… Lisbet. I have three. I credit them with keeping me sane and focused. Kids don’t understand, but they are still children and need to be taken care of 24/7. They cry when they can’t find their other shoe. Helps to keep things in perspective. Mary would have wanted me to put the kids first, and I did. They made it easier. The routine was purposeful and unrelenting. Sometimes, ya just gotta do what ya gotta do and not think about anything else.”

“Hmmm…”

“But, everyone grieves differently. Do you have kids, Lisbet… oh, I’m sorry. You mentioned you didn’t.”

“No, we were only married for six years. It never seemed like the right time, what with careers, money, moving and such. Now, I see that was a mistake.”

“It doesn’t help to second guess your decisions, Lisbet. You made them together and, at the time, it was the right thing to do—for both of you. That’s how it works. Me and my Mary used to say that all the time—one for all and all for one.”

“That’s wonderful, Detecti… I’m sorry. What’s your name?”

“Richard French. Dick, please.”

“Detective Dick? Dick Dick?” I chuckled, then laughed with a mounting belly-roll which I found therapeutic.

My laughter quickly became uncontrollable, as it seemed all my emotions were of late. Then Dick Dick started to laugh too and it fed my release. It felt like we laughed for a long time together. When,

finally, I drew a small exhausted breath, I smiled at my visitor.

"I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me."

"It's okay. It was funny. It felt good to laugh."

"Yes, it did. Now what would you like to ask me, Dick?"

"Really, only if you have thought of anything you may have just remembered?"

"Well, Carey Myers was supposed to go fishing with him. I don't know if I ever told anyone that. I don't know that it even matters. Carey is fine, isn't he?"

"No, he is missing, too. We have questioned all your husband's friends, associates and co-workers. They all speak very highly of him. He was liked and admired. He was known as a generous and compassionate boss, and a loyal friend. A few mentioned he seemed preoccupied recently, but that could have been anything. We are trying to find out what was on his mind. Most likely, it had nothing to do with the accident or your husband's disappearance…"

"Death."

"Well, for now, we have him listed as missing. Hopefully, we will know more soon."

"I am afraid I don't know anything more, Dick."

"How did you meet?"

"We met in Paris. I was there for two years to finish my masters at the Sorbonne and complete an internship at *L'Officiel,* a prominent French magazine. I am a freelance writer. He was there on business. I was assigned to see that he had everything he needed while on assignment."

"Oh, what kind of work does—did—your husband do?"

"He was in Network Integrated Management and Intelligent Architecture—NIMIA—the acronym for his company."

The detective pulled his cell phone from his breast pocket and it vibrated noticeably again before he looked at the caller id, muted it and set it on the edge of the end table.

"Ah, yes, of course."

"But, then you knew that…"

"Yes. Tell me about him personally; tell me about the private man

you knew as your husband. How old was he, where was he from, did you ever meet his parents?"

"He was born in New York and lived there all his life. His parents died in some sort of accident in Europe. I never asked too much because it was so painful for him. I knew he would tell me what he wanted me to know when the time was right for him. He was an only child, so he inherited their entire estate. He used it to start his business. We met, fell in love and got married. A pretty simple story, actually. Anything else?"

"Well, perhaps just one thing more. Did your husband have a favorite place he liked to go to be alone? Perhaps a cabin in the woods or studio in the city? Did his parents leave him any property he liked to visit… anything at all that would be a getaway for him?"

"Are you suggesting that my husband is alive and hunkered down in a hidey-hole somewhere, deliberately secreted away—to get away from me?"

"No, Lisbet. I am not. I am just trying to cover all the bases. After all, someone higher up is going to ask me the same questions. Did he have such a place that he took you in the past?"

I paused, thinking, as I tried to remember anything that I may have noticed in his papers, but I did not recall any such place.

"No, Detective, I cannot think of anything like that. I have never been to a secret hideaway with him, nor have I ever seen any place like that referenced in our financial papers. Is there anything else?"

"No, I think that is it for now. May I call you or stop by if I think of anything else?"

"Please call, but yes, of course."

I rose to indicate I was through talking and Detective Dick took the cue, stood and turned towards the door. He leaned forward and opened the door. As he moved over the threshold, he paused, and turned to me, looking perplexed. Scratching his bearded chin, he asked a final question.

"How old did you say your husband was…?"

"Actually, I didn't. You should have that in your reports. Never mind. He was forty-two. He was several years older than me. Why?"

“No particular reason; I just forgot. He looked a good deal younger than his years. Quite a handsome guy.”

I extended my hand to shake the detective’s hand as he departed. He hesitated, then wrapped his long fingers around mine and shook my hand.

His skin was cold to the touch.

“Forgive me for my rude, unwelcoming behavior earlier. I am having a hard time carrying on.”

“I have found in my line of work, and I have seen a lot of this, that everyone heals differently. Take all the time you need. You will know when you are ready. And, should you remember anything, or find anything in his estate paperwork, would you call me, please? You have my card.”

“Yes, of course. Good-bye, Detective.”

“Yes, ma’am—good-bye. Oh, and Ms. Baylord, forgive me for meddling, but you might want to see your doctor. You look just like my Jane did every time we were going to have a new baby. Lock the door behind me.”

I was dumbstruck. The audacity of the man; who the hell did he think he was?

I closed the door on the detective, rolled onto my back and pressed against the door. Impossible. How would he know if I was pregnant? It was more likely he was trying to suggest I see my doctor for help. I thought what a curious man the police detective was, then remembered his warning and threw all the locks and dead bolts on the door. It had grown dark. I put the chain guard back in its security channel and walked to the kitchen, flipping the light on.

I dismissed the detective and his careless speculation as harmless but well intended.

The kitchen was a mess, more neglected than dirty. I was ashamed of myself and how much I had let everything go. I opened a cupboard in search of something to eat. I was suddenly famished. Luckily, I found a crumpled bag of Top Ramen tucked in the back behind some Bisquick. I sorely needed to shop… and shower; a shampoo would be a must.

What if Damien was still alive? What if he had been knocked out and thrown clear of the boat? What if he couldn't remember who he was? I was suddenly filled with hope beyond measure which was surely not the detective's intention. But, he planted the seed of hope, and it had taken up eager residence deep in my heart within seconds.

Hope was the baneful shadow of acceptance. .

Suddenly, I had questions and an excited anxious deliberation settled over me.

After a bite to eat, I was going to look into all our financials in your office. Perhaps there was something filed away that you had forgotten to share with me. Anything was possible. Everything was possible now.

But not before a bath.

***

I opened the door to your office in our home and wondered where I should begin while I towel-dried my hair. A bit of food and a hot bath had been transforming. I felt energized, eager, enthusiastic even. I was so glad that I answered the door to the detective and I almost had not. I hesitated and knew there was nothing more I could tell him. Little did I know, he would leave me so repurposed and willing to believe again.

Your desk was the obvious place to start. Perhaps there was a box, or keys to a secret compartment. Perhaps there was a file you knew I would find in the event anything happened to you. It could be as simple as that.

But, it wasn't.

I labored for hours until, finally, I felt beleaguered. I moved to the leather sofa near the bookcase, sat and stared at the desk, willing it to impart the secrets within.

But, it did not.

I slipped into the warm folds of the sofa and laid my head upon the well-worn leather of the arm. The heavy fur throw we called 'Bear' on the back slid against my hip and I pulled it over me as I fell quickly

asleep. I imagined I was watching you work at your desk, as I often did, while I sat here in this very spot. I felt close to you all over again. 'Bear' wrapped me in your embrace as a final despondent tear escaped.

As I drifted into the dark abyss, I thought I heard you calling my name. Your voice gave me hope and it filled me with peace. I knew we would be together. Someday… someway… somehow. I will wait for you…

Hours later, it seemed to me, I heard music. Yes, in the distance, but music still. It was our wedding ballad; I know it was... How did it go? *I will be right here waiting for you*. Ah, yes, *Right Here Waiting* by Richard Marx. I hummed the tune in my head and I saw you in my dream, whirling me around the dance floor in front of my family and our friends.

Oh, Damien, how happy you made me; how happy we were together. How I miss you…

The image went gray, the music softly faded, overtaken by unfamiliar sounds coming from the center of the house. Perhaps you were finding your way back to my dream, perhaps… if I am very still, you will return and I will feel your arms about me once again.

Alas, when I finally woke, Bear was firmly in my grasp and wrapped tight around my body where you should have been. While I unfurled myself from the warm cocoon in which I slept, I looked up and saw you sitting at your desk. I rubbed my eyes, breath caught in my throat.

"Damien…?"

"Yes, darling. I wondered how long before you woke."

"What?"

"I have been waiting for you to wake."

"Well, I am awake now… what happened to you? Where have you been? Why didn't you call? Tell me. Goddamit!"

"In due time, my love, in due time…"

"In due time…?"

"There is an explanation for everything. What is most important is that I am here now, with you, in our home together."

I could not hold back the tears, nor my impulse to throw myself into your arms… and so, I didn't. I covered your face in my kisses, buried my fingers in your hair, pressed my heart to your heart. My tongue darted into your mouth to savor the familiar flavors of your love. The long, lost dance between our tongues began—curling, twisting, turning and exploring every small fold and secret place left too long unattended.

You smelled the same.

You felt the same.

Your touch was the same.

Your heart beat with mine—the same as it always had.

I found the spot of comfort in your embrace as I curled into a tight, heartbroken ball on your lap and yet…

Where had you been? Why had you forsaken me? You broke from our kiss and brushed an errant curl from my face. Your question pierced my thoughts and deflated the overwhelming feeling of comfort and relief.

"The man that was just here. How do you know him?"

"Pardon me? You have been gone for months; no word from you, no proof of life, nor death. Are you serious?"

I beat my fists furiously against your chest while tears of pain and frustration welled in my eyes.

"Yes, my love, I am very serious—deadly so. This is of the utmost importance. How do you know him?"

"Damien… I don't know him. How can you even suggest that?" My temper raised in heated measures burning and chafing all the while.

"Trust me, darling, as you always have. There will be time for your anger later."

"I do not know that man, Damien. I have never met him nor have I ever seen him."

"Then what was he doing here?"

"He is a detective, Damien, investigating your disappearance. He had proper identification and knew a lot about you. Here! I have his card. He knew a lot about the boat and Carey. Oh my God, Carey! Is he alive? I thought he was trying to solve the mystery of what

happened to you and Carey. He wasn't? What the Hell is going on?"

You took the business card from my hand and studied it.

I yanked my hand back fiercely and knocked the phone off your desk. I didn't care.

"Here, here, my darling. Please, forgive me for being away and so silent. I couldn't stay away. No matter what happens, I have to be with you. I could not face another day—let alone a lifetime—without you. Lisbet, my love, forgive me, please. You must believe me, though; I never would have if I thought there was any other way to protect you."

"Protect me…? Damien… I am so confused."

And with that I began to cry. This time I was in your arms, at least, thank God.

Damien held me and rocked me in his embrace. He brushed from my cheeks the tears that fell in rivulets down my face and muffled my sobs with his kisses. I couldn't stop sobbing—at first with love and anger, and then in complete relief.

"Why didn't you call me? Why did you let me ache? For whatever reason you chose to disappear, why didn't you just let me know it was all a ruse? I have been in agony."

"I know, darling. I know and I feel awful about it. But if I had told you I was fine, and it was all a façade, when you were interviewed by the insurance inspectors or police, would you have been as convincing?"

"Convincing? Would I have been as convincing…? Would I have been as convincing?"

"Lisbet, please, darling. Calm down. Please, take a breath and slow down. I am sure you will see my reasoning once you understand the full breadth of the situation."

"We have a situation, Damien? When did this 'situation' develop? When did a situation overrule our relationship, our trust, our vows? When did a situation creep into our marriage and take precedence over everything we hold dear? When did a situation become more important than me?" I wept. I wailed. I fought the embrace meant to comfort me. I wanted to wound Damien as much as his selfish,

thoughtless disappearance hurt me. I wanted him to feel the cavernous, black abyss of hopelessness I accepted as my fate when I finally acknowledged his death.

All the while, he lived and breathed as I prayed to join him in death, agonized by his loss.

I stared at him with unyielding intensity. I defied Damien to give me an explanation that I could—would—accept as plausible and believable to the point of forgiveness or acceptance. I wanted to be joyous about his return, his life, his every breath. I *was* jubilant that he was still alive! And yet, I was angry; I felt deceived—betrayed.

I could not forgive him, and yet, I fell into his embrace.

My knees were weak; my heart hammered, erratic with relief and desire. My mind blazed with anger. This wonderful man I loved once, and thought dead, had returned to me and reignited my life. I regained my composure, if only briefly.

"Tell me. Tell me everything. Leave nothing out. Spare me no detail, however minor you think it may be. Where have you been and why?"

"I promise to tell you everything when I can. Right now, you must have blind faith in me, in our love, in my desire to protect you."

"Protect me? Protect me from what? What is happening, Damien? Oh, my God…"

"God plays no part in what I must do. What I had to do."

"Then, what does? Me, our life together, our love?"

"Yes, but I cannot tell you more now. Please Lisbet, if you ever trusted me, you must trust me again now. If you ever loved me…"

"If? If? How can you even suggest that my love for you is questionable? I almost died here, in our home. I wanted to die, I missed you so. I never thought I would be faced with the prospect of living without you and when I was, I didn't want to. I didn't want to live without you. I wrapped myself in 'Bear' and prayed for God to take me and join us in death, or bring you back to me."

"If I believed in God, I would say He brought me back to you."

"Oh, my God. Damien, you are right. You are so right! He did bring you back to me. Is it, was it, against your will?"

“No, darling, it was not against my will. I love you with every fiber of my soul. I could not forsake you.”

I buried my face in your chest and felt your heart beat against each of my tears. Whatever took you from me, had returned you—to hold in my arms. I cried for my happiness, no longer angry, but perplexed. I trusted that you would tell me, in time and in good faith, the story that had pierced my heart with the pain of your presumed death. I thanked God for your life, and for mine, restored with a heart beating full of hope and promise.

You cooed and comforted me until the aroma of your aftershave seduced my mind and charged my stomach with a mounting desire. It had been a long time since I felt your touch, your strong arms around me, your heated palms on my back. You exhaled against my neck, and your breath felt like molten lava as it crawled down my cleavage. How was it possible that a sensation so hot could be responsible for the trail of gooseflesh left in its wake? Ah, the magic of passion; it was unexplainable. Something beyond explanation, requiring only acceptance: it was not up to me to ask why and question the power or the rhythm of the Universe.

I accepted my good fortune and melted into your body.

My God, how I missed you.

I could breathe again.

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You touched my face and kissed my tears. I felt the errant curls that wildly framed my face, which still felt hot and flushed from anger, but softening to desire. Your heart hammered an erratic refrain of passion and yearning against my breast pressed firmly against you. Had you missed me too? Your touched convinced me you had. My heart quickened to meet the cadence of yours, and the tempo of our excitement wove a fervent melody in which our bodies sang with a single melodic instrument. My breath quickened under the heat of your hunger. It was as if you never left me, the beat of our love so predetermined our need. It was always like that—irresistible, intense,

and inevitable.

Still, in the back of my mind, I wondered. My imagination ran. Like a child raised by wolves, it careened—erratic and uncontrollable—to the dark recesses where fear resided, peeking out sporadically to spew its demons and cast panic in its wake. I did not know where you had gone, nor why. For now, it did not matter. It would, later.

I was so grateful you were here that I suppressed the demonic destruction idling patiently beneath the surface of my fear. For now, your caress softened the months of anguish, the solemn destiny carved out by your death. I existed in that screaming darkness until the moment I woke to your voice. It was in that moment where hope rode back into my heart on ribbons of sunlight and warmed my shriveled soul.

Is it possible this was all a terrible mistake? Could it be that, in a long night's silent sleep, a nightmare had trafficked upon my apprehension, stolen what little reason I possessed that you would return—that you were not gone and had never left me at all—and I would wake as I had to your impatient smile? Is that what happened? I left my thoughts in the sunset and drifted in your embrace to a place of warmth and security. I did not care. My love, my life—you—had returned when my hours were at their darkest. The ebb of my life filtered back into my soul with each kiss. I was not dead. I had not joined you in death, but pulled you back. I was sure the power of my love had brought you back to me somehow—and that was good enough for me, for now.

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Suddenly, there was a rap on the door, followed quickly by the doorbell. I startled. You stiffened as if poised for fight or flight.

"Who can that be?"

"I don't know, Damien. I am certainly not expecting anyone. Not with things like this. Did you make arrangements to meet Carey here? How is Carey; where is he? Did he die in the boat explosion?"

"I told you. I'll explain later. You must answer the door. See who it

is, but don't let them in until you tell me."

"Okay, give me a minute."

I rose, softly padded to the front door, and flipped all the locks save the security chain. I opened the door as far as the chain would allow.

"Yes?"

"Lisbet, it's Detective Dick French."

"Yes, Detective? What are you doing back here?"

"I am sorry to disturb you, but I left my cell on the end table. May I come in?"

"No, Detective, you may not. Please wait. I will get your phone."

I left the door ajar, secured by the security chain while I turned to get the phone. I looked on the end table, saw his cell phone and retrieved it only to find the detective standing in my living room behind me—the door open and the chain swinging.

"Detective, how did you do that? I told you to wait!"

"You did tell me to wait, Lisbet, but you slid the chain off and opened the door. How would I get in otherwise?"

"I did not.! How did you do that? Get out! Get OUT!" I stamped my foot impulsively and pointed to the door with an accusatory finger.

"Miss Lisbet, please, I just need my phone. You let me in, really. I am not a magician. I am just a flat-footed dick trying to find out what happened to your husband. I'm sorry. You asked me to wait, but opened the door. I misunderstood your gesture as an invitation to come in."

"Yes, yes of course, Detective. I don't know what came over me. Of course, I must have, I just don't remember unhooking the chain…"

"But, you did."

"Yes, I must have, didn't I?"

"You look different, if you don't mind my saying Lisbet. You smell different, too."

"A bath and a nap work wonders. A dab of Damien's cologne made me feel somehow closer to him."

The detective looked around the room as though investigating, searching for something specific. He seemed uneasy, beads of sweat forming on his brow.

“Detective, are you alright?”

“Yes, Lisbet, I am fine. Just something crossed my mind; a memory plucked from the past by your perfume.”

“Your phone, Dick.”

“Wha…” The detective snapped his gaze back to my eyes.

“Your phone?”

“Oh, yes, yes of course.”

“What took you so long to return for your phone, Dick?” I outstretched my arm with the detective’s phone in my hand.

“I’m sorry. I got all the way back to the station and realized I left my phone here on the table. I guess I was wrapped up in my thoughts and lost track of time. I turned around and came back. I’m sorry, I should have called.”

“Yes, you should have, but what’s done is done. No harm. Here’s your phone. Goodnight, Detective.”

“Yes, Lisbet. I’m sorry to intrude.”

I walked him to the door and smiled.

“Goodnight, Detective, and I know… lock the doors.”

“Goodnight, Lisbet.” The Detective looked sheepish and apologetic.

I smiled, closed the door and threw all the deadbolts. I grabbed the chain and secured it in the track.

I turned back into the living room and started towards the office.

“Damien, Damien? Where are you?”

I walked into the office expecting to see you there, yet you were not. Had you hidden from the detective when you heard our exchange at the door?

“Damien? You can come out now. Where are you? Damien?”

I received no answer. I searched the entire apartment, calling your name as I went, but I couldn’t find you. Exhausted, I sat on the living room sofa and began to cry again. The whole thing had been a dream. You had never returned; never kissed my tears, or held me tight and healed my heart. You were really gone and I realized that, in my sorrow, a delirium rose to give me peace. I cried for my loss. I cried for my lost love. I cried for my soul, bleak and hopeless now. I cried for your soul.

I pulled my legs up on the couch, wrapped my terrycloth robe around my knees, and curled into a tight, pain-filled ball. I rocked back and forth, tears streaming from my heart and rolling down my face. I heard you whisper my name, and lifted my tear stained face to search for the source.

“Lisbet, darling, please don’t cry.”

I looked up and into your eyes, unwilling to trust what I saw. My eyes stung, clouded from the salty tears shed for my loss in my incredulity.

“Damien…?”

“Yes, darling, yes.”

You bent, collected me in your arms, and carried me to the bedroom, my face buried in the crook of your neck.

“Damien, I looked everywhere. Where did you hide? I couldn’t find you; I thought, I thought…”

“That it’d all been a dream?”

“Yes, a dream. I thought your kisses were the tears I wept while I slept. I do not believe I could live without you, Damien.”

“I know I cannot live without you, my Lisbet. It is expressly because of you that I have returned.”

“Returned…? You mean now? Or earlier tonight?”

His warmth, his scent filled me in a single gasp. He stood me beside the bed—our bed. I didn't know much when it came to love, except that it was about being so white hot you freeze, losing your breath and control over your limbs, then falling, and abandoning all hope of survival.

I felt myself flush and my knees weaken. A blanket of goose flesh draped across my body in graduated, throbbing waves of passion. My pulse stuttered as I froze under your spell. I wanted to touch you, to complete the magnetic connection ignited in our glance: embracing, flesh against flesh. Your arms coiled around my shoulders to my waist and pulled my body to yours. Chest to chest, the source of your love—your heart—beating against mine.

I could not help but to fall into you. I surrendered control of my body to the foils of your hot currents. I rode my passions into the heat

of your heart and the arms of your affections.

I tumbled into your love as surely as if I had fallen off of a cliff. You halted my descent when my knees buckled and my body folded, enveloping me into the warm waiting embrace of my lover, my husband.

You laid me on our bed, my gentle, tender lover. You handled me so delicately I felt fragile, a breakable crystal snowflake.

"Earlier tonight, I realized I could never leave you. I thought I would die in this long absence from you. I have been in agony."

"As have I, Damien. These many months in your absence, the agony of my solitude was often too much to bear. I prayed to God to let me join you in death. I wanted to."

"There is that moment, Lisbet, suspended in time, when you meet the person who connects you to humanity, to others, to life—to yourself. It is that one person into whom you release yourself, freely, carelessly… with a single touch, a stolen whisper, a silent look.

"You are that one person for me. The day we met, I dove eagerly, hopelessly falling into your heart. The first time we made love, I rode your heartbeat to your soul and drowned in the soft nuance your shadow cast across my body. I lost my breath in the oceans of your essence when you bent to kiss me, breathing life into my desires and love into my heart.

"In the night and shaded grays of your embrace, I drown in the sea of your love. Through you, with you, because of you—I am elevated to the ethereal currents that only love bestows upon the wicked, weary and wanton long desperate for the sweet rewards of the human connection.

"There is life in love. There is love in life, too long in the coming for me, but at once a welcome haven in you. I reveled in the warmth of your approach because, suspended in time, you are my only connection—to this life, to love, to God. Let me drown in us."

"Oh, God. Oh, Damien. How I love you, missed you. How I need you. Your touch connects my soul to my heart, and my heart to you—it is the Trinity of our love. I thought I would die without you."

"That is why I left. Because… you will die with me, Lisbet, because

of me, if I stay. But… I had to see you again—to explain."

"Then explain. Nothing could be worse than to live without you, Damien. Nothing."

"I will. I will, in due time. But, first…"

I felt the sash of my robe loosen as you untied the knot. Across the arch of my back, I felt the sash tug, then slither out from underneath me. I opened my eyes to watch you. You looked hypnotized, your eyes dark and fixed. Your comment, 'you will die with me' sent a flickered a shiver of fear across my consciousness, but I dismissed it as you ran your fingertips from the hollow in my neck, under my robe to the rise of my breast. My breath caught in my throat as surely as if you clutched it in your hand.

"A-ahhh…" I ached under your touch.

"Shhhhh…" You encouraged, and slipped the robe from my shoulders to expose my breasts: hard and lifted into the moonlight, eager to be kissed.

My arousal needed little encouragement from you. It electrified me, a current of desire that ran the length of my body and fluttered, radiating from my core. The pulse of my heart surely was evident in my temple as you pressed your lips at my hairline. I heard you breathe in the scent of my freshly bathed skin and felt your heated sigh on my flesh as you exhaled.

You kissed each of my eyelids and licked away the remnants of my tears.

I was afraid to touch you, lest you not be real, but resistance was futile. Fingers woven through your hair, I knotted the soft short curls in my fists and pulled you in tight. I drew your mouth to mine and buried my dreams in your kiss.

"Oh, Damien," I mumbled into your open mouth, your breath warm as it tangled with mine. "I love you, so much."

"I love you, too, darling. Oh, God, how I missed your body. How I missed the way you smell, your touch, the taste of your kiss."

I was wet immediately, flowing with a river of unrequited love and passion. I arched, encouraging your touch to follow the curve of my flesh. The slope of my taut stomach to the silken slit where my thighs

met was fluid, like a single stroke from God's hand on a canvas of carnal beauty. It was a curve you had not forgotten, for you had travelled that highway frequently in our married life together.

I turned my head, wrapped my arm gracefully around your shoulders, and gazed at you. Our eyes met in a hypnotic caress. Your eyes were black, intense. I hungered for your hips to dig into mine, spread my legs and bury your cock inside me.

You understood. You knew how much I needed you, and the eager weeping of your penis as it grew proclaimed how much you desired me. The head of your cock pushed into the petal soft folds of my pussy, insistent to gain an unfettered entry. I wanted it—to feel you inside. But, right now, I wanted to taste you more. My hunger for you was powerful, animalistic, almost feral.

"Stop, Damien. Please, stop. Come here." I meant is as a plea, but my request sounded more like a growl.

I couldn't help myself, and pulled you up by your shoulders, grabbed the hem of your shirt and tugged it over your head. The slick sensation of your flesh against mine was an arousal I couldn't delay any longer. I pushed you back on your heels, grasping at your belt buckle and fly.

Lavender ribbons of moonlight beamed into our bedroom in welcome of your return.

I salivated with excitement as I watched you fall back on your heels, your eyes clocking my movements. Your furrowed brow softened as beads of sweat formed, covering your face with tiny droplets, and reflected the moon's embrace like diamond facets beneath your skin. You appeared to glow in our mutually shared love. The intensity of the moment was ethereal, as though we were floating, elevated to another plane; one only those blessed by the heavens reveled within.

Seduced by the moonlight and you, I was overwhelmed, and joined the moon to feast upon your delights.

I slipped my hand into your fly and felt the warm hardness of your cock. You dripped with desire. You kicked out of your pants, stance wide and closer to my mouth. I took you to my lips, conscious of your

intense scrutiny, and kissed your purple head in greeting. Your cock throbbed in my hand as my tongue rimmed the lip of the head.

Oh, God… how did I survive without this staff of life—your staff, my life? You gave me everything though this cock. Everything—from the deepest parts of your soul, your heart, and your life.

You straddled me, knees astride the fullness of my breasts. I grabbed your hips and pulled you closer to my face and waiting lips. I peeked up as the passion overtook your face and you leaned into the padded headboard of our bed. You rolled your head along the padding, and bit your lip as I rimmed your cock with the tip of my tongue. I had you, all of you, and that was what I missed, loved.

I took your fullness into my mouth and your breathing suspended. I took your fullness in short bursts and thrusts. Your pre-come coated my lips, my throat, and I savored the beloved salty sweetness. The flame of hunger burned bright in my belly, fueled by the lack of passion I endured in your absence.

You moaned and thrust, rolled and trembled. I tickled the under-lip of your cock with my tongue, ran it the full length of your shaft, and spiraled my eagerly curled tongue back up to its head. I sucked and speared the slit in your cock with the rigid tip of my tongue. You weakened in my arms when you thrust yourself all the way down my throat and I rippled my muscles around the full size of your cock. Held fast in my python-grip, I claimed you for my own and swept you into oblivion, lost in your orgasm.

You were mine, and mine alone, again.

I swallowed you, heart and soul.

“Oh, God, Lissie. Oh, my God how I missed you.” You gave a final strong, quivering thrust and leaned against the headboard.

You released your grip on the headboard, and slowly slipped from your perch above me. Sweat glistened on your skin beneath the moonlight that sliced through the sheer drapes. You dropped your arms around me and held me close; so close I felt almost as though you were never gone.

Gone.

Gone.

“What is going on, Damien? What is happening to us?”

“This is very difficult, my darling. I have much to tell you and I don’t know how, or where, to begin.”

“We have as much time as you need. Take as much time as you want.”

“I don’t want you to think I don’t trust you, or that I don’t think you will understand. I do trust you and I know you will understand. That is not the problem. When I tell you everything, you’ll be forced to make a decision. I stand to lose you. Having tried to spare you that already, I know I cannot live without you.”

“Damien, trust your instincts. You came home—back to me—because this is where your heart is, with me, wherever we are. I live in you, too, and I died while you were gone.”

You tightened your embrace around my shoulders, cuddling me tight. I pulled the length of my robe over my cooling body, damp with perspiration and the evidence of our love. You rolled onto your back and I found my safe place, notched against your shoulder and chest. I breathed in the comforting perfume our lovemaking left on your body, and listened as your heartbeat began to slow.

“This story goes back centuries, Lisbet. But, let me begin simply; this is going to be a lot to take in. Have you ever given a rising thought to my appearance?”

“Other than that you are virile, strikingly handsome, and I am proud to be on your arm when we go out or that you are stunning naked?”

“No, but thank you, darling. I feel the same way about you. No, I mean my face and, of course, my body and hands.”

“I’m afraid you’ll need to be more specific, Damien. But, first… are you thirsty or hungry?”

“Yes, actually. I am.” Damien seemed to pause and rethink his explanation.

I had little in the house to eat other than Ramen but, I did have some canned black bread, Italian olives, dried figs and some sort of cheese I could plate. I thought, The Louis Roederer bottle of Cristal was still chilling in the refrigerator. You brought it home to celebrate

our anniversary months ago. That would do nicely, and appropriately, considering your return was more of a reason to celebrate than our anniversary. We had come to accept there would always be another anniversary together. I will remind myself that your life is more celebratory than our anniversary from now on. I will never take you for granted again.

And, I had news for you.

I rose from our bed, the sheets disheveled from our lovemaking, and ran my fingers along the length of your torso. I had lost so much weight while you were 'dead', but you still looked like a god. I paused to think about your question while I tied my robe sash. You have changed little in the years since we met. Your parents must have been made of strong European genes and I was grateful at once that your heritage was so sturdy.

All the more reason to celebrate.

When I returned, you were snoring. Your gentle, rhythmic breaths always gave me such comfort, but more so now than ever before. I put the tray on the ottoman and sat in the armchair by the dark, cold fireplace to listen to you sleep. I was at peace again, safe in the knowledge that these many months were a distant nightmare now. You stirred…

"I'm sorry, darling. Did I wake you?"

"No, Lissie. No, you didn't. Come here, my love. I never want to be more than a few feet from you ever again—if you'll have me."

"What a silly thing to say, Damien. I will never let you go."

"Ah, don't be so sure."

"Don't you be silly. Here; I brought food and wine. This is the wine you brought home with flowers the night of our anniversary. I can't imagine why we never drank the champagne."

"As I remember, we were otherwise occupied that night, darling. A fine anniversary it was, too."

I leaned in to kiss you and was rejuvenated by the sheer vitality of your presence.

"Ah, food and drink. What could be better than this?"

"A baby."

I hadn't expected to tell you like this.

"A… what are you talking about, Lisbet? A baby? What?"

"Yes, Damien. I am sorry to blurt it out like this, but I was going to tell you on our anniversary when you were called out."

"How long? When did you find out? Are you and the baby alright? Oh, my God…"

"I found out the day before our anniversary. I was so excited; I wanted to tell you right away. I wanted to rush back, run into your office, and jump in your arms to tell you immediately, but I decided to be a little more deliberate."

"Oh, God, Lissie…"

"What, Damien? I thought you would be happy; we've waited so long, and now he's coming."

"I am, Lissie, I am happy. He? Did you say he?"

"Yes, Damien. You are—we are going to have a little boy."

I let the words sink in for a few moments while I buttered some black bread for you and poured the champagne.

"This is magical, Lissie. You have made me the happiest man alive. But, how are you? You have lost so much weight. Oh, my God, Lissie. I am so sorry. What I have put you through. I am so terribly sorry."

"I am fine now that you are home, Damien. The weight will return quickly, now that you are here to help me work up my appetite."

"This does complicate things, Lisbet." You sipped Cristal and ate the bread with a fig and a handful of almonds.

"Babies always seem to and yet millions of people have managed since time immemorial."

"Yes, well… yes. Of course, we will manage—one way or another."

"What on earth are you getting at, Damien? Are we out of money? Did we lose the business? What has you so perplexed?"

You stared off into a corner of the room, a distant shadow creeping over your face. The faraway look in your eyes scared me and my hand immediately went to my belly.

"How do I begin?" I barely heard you and thought you were speaking to yourself so I remained quiet.

You turned to me, and the shadow lifted. You smiled, took a deep

breath and began.

"I love you with a love so powerful, I cannot live without you. It is selfish, as all selfish things are because I have forsaken your safety—and now our son's—to indulge my passion for you. I haven't the strength to live without your smile, or your touch. I would rather die than live another moment without you. That is the problem."

I allowed you to pause thinking you would continue, but when the silence persisted, I broke in.

"Problem? How could that be…?"

"Please, Lissie. Let me do this myself, or I will never have the strength to do it at all."

I leaned back in the armchair, resolved not to interrupt again and let you proceed at your own pace. You took another breath and looked away from me.

"I am sure you have heard stories of the Undead, or the Dark Knight. Perhaps the Prince of Darkness? None of them really do me justice. But, they are apt descriptions of how I must live my life."

My hand went to my mouth, open in shock and horror. It stifled a gasp.

"Yes, Lissie, you have every right to be horrified. I have deceived you. Your reaction tells me I was right to keep the truth from you all these years. The truth is, if I stay with you, I will die and no doubt you and the baby will too, Lisbet."

I wanted to say something, but my lips refused to move. My heart thundered in my chest, racing to flee what you would dare to tell me next—yet, I could not move. The hand at my mouth dropped to my neck and clutched my robe tight. My fingertips were damp and cold where they brushed my skin.

"I was born many, many years ago in what was then Ruthenia. It bordered Poland, Moldavia and Hungary. To the east was Lithuania. My family was wealthy and resourceful. We were cursed, or so our village people whispered. Of course, they were uneducated, many living and working on our lands. They were afraid to speak out against us in any way. It was the fourteenth century. I am sure you can understand their reluctance to defy my father and grandfather in

any way. They feared for their families, their very lives. My grandfather was old then, but as ruthless as he had always been."

I couldn't breathe. I grew light-headed and dizzy. I dropped my hand to my lap where it instinctively curled around my belly, over my womb, to protect my baby from what I was about to hear.

"You are the Prince of Darkness…" I spoke in no more than a whisper.

"Well, yes, Lisbet. You could say I am one of them."

I felt faint, as if my neck could no longer bear the weight of my spinning head. I tipped my head against the chair back.

"I am so sorry, Lisbet. But it is more important now than ever before that you know."

"And the man looking for you, Detective Richard French. Is he a detective? He isn't, is he?"

"No, Lissie, he isn't. He is a member of a small group of hunters that travel in search of… people—those like me who are trapped in an… unrecoverable… condition."

"Vampires…?" I whispered, unable to believe anything I was hearing.

"Yes, Lissie. We are known crudely, and in theatre, as vampires. Please, Lisbet, don't pull back further. Surely you can see that I am not a danger to you, or our baby."

"My baby…"

"I would never hurt you or the baby, Lissie. Never. I will protect you to the death."

"But?"

"'Detective' French is here to kill me. That is why I left. It was the only way I could protect you."

"Protect me?"

"Just let me finish, Lisbet, please? It is hard enough already."

"But if you are here to protect me—protect us—who will protect you? You are risking your life to be here with me—with us."

"I have fought this slayer, and many like him, over the years. There will always be more to fight. It is a tireless battle; one which I must win now that you have given me further purpose. The baby means

everything to me, Lissie. Everything. I know we didn't plan it, and I never wanted to bring a woman, let alone a child, into this so-called life. But, I have, and I will do all that is within my power to protect you both."

"This man, the detective… he is hunting you to kill you?"

"Yes, Lisbet. He is under the misconception that all men of darkness, all vampires, are evil and that we pry upon the weak and disenfranchised—people without families, or loved ones, so that they will never be missed. That isn't true."

"You… what do you have to do to get rid of, or stop him from following and killing you? Can't we explain it to him? Isn't there a way to convince him to leave you—and us—alone?"

"I am afraid not, my love. These people have made it their life's work to find and kill us. They do not understand that we have evolved over the centuries. You see, they are children of the darkness, too. They use their powers to stop the 'bad' vampires."

"Oh, my God…" I gasped at your use of the word.

"Yes, vampires, Lisbet. I am a vampire. He is a vampire slayer, or hunter, and has been chasing me for a hundred years. It is because I met and married you, that he found me. They have keenly honed senses of sight and smell—almost extrasensory."

"When he returned for his cell phone, he could smell you on me…" I was horrified that I had led him to you.

"Please, do not feel responsible. He had already found me. He knew where I was a year ago. I avoided discovery and then decided the only way to protect you was to fake my death. I am sorry that Carey had to die in the process."

"Oh, my God, Damien. Carey… his wife and family." I began to cry for their loss, repulsed at what I heard.

"Carey was one of us, Lisbet. He was about to die, and came to me for assistance. I did not murder Carey. He was my friend, a very old and dear one. We travelled many years together and shielded one another from detection on many occasions. Please, you must believe me. Carey was ill. The one thing that can kill us naturally is a blood disorder, and Carey developed it. He wanted his family taken care of

and his legacy protected. It was the only way out for him… and me.

"So, when I came up with this plan, Carey said he would help me as long as he could die in the fire and ensure that his family was taken care of financially. It worked perfectly, with one exception.

"I couldn't stand being away from you. Now that you know… before I knew you were pregnant, I was prepared to offer you a choice, but now that is impossible."

"Why? Tell me, is it because of our baby?"

"Yes, of course it is. If it was just us, I could ask you to live with me for an eternity. That is impossible now that you are carrying our child."

"But, you… you were a child once. How did you become a… a… prince?"

"It is a long story. Listen, I have to think and come up with a plan. The best plan is to kill the detective. We can live as we always have, only you will grow old and the baby will grow up. I will stay the same. Or, we can continue with the way we are: you run or sell the company, I don't care. Have the baby and let everyone continue to believe I am dead. I will come home at night to be with you. That could work."

"But, what about when our son gets older? How do we prevent him from talking about you—his father—in school, to baby sitters, teachers and counselors?"

"I don't know, Lisbet. I am only just faced with this turn of events. I do not care for myself, except that I love you. I care about you, the baby, and how all of this affects you."

"And how does it? If I go with you, what will happen to our son? Will he die? I can't—won't—let that happen."

"Nor I. I must think. I just don't know. What I am certain of is this; if the detective returns, he will know for sure I have been here. He will smell me on you, everywhere in our home. It will be a matter of time before he kills me, and perhaps you. That defeats everything."

The look of horror on my face must have turned to shock and then acceptance. Both hands, once wringing in my lap, rose mechanically and I buried my face in them, crying in earnest.

You sat up on the edge of the bed to comfort me, no doubt, but that was a tall order.

“How can we live like this? With him hanging over our heads like a guillotine, never knowing when it will fall. I cannot—I won’t.” I yelled, the outburst muffled in my hands.

“Then I must go, and go forever. That is the only sure way to ensure your safety and that of our child. I will find a way to lead him away from you. You keep the company, or sell it—whatever you want—and raise our child. There will always be enough money for you to live as we do. In time, you will forget and remarry. You must. You deserve to be happy. You have so much love to give.”

“No. No. There must be another way. We have to find another way.”

“I have to think, Lisbet, I must. Come, let’s enjoy ourselves and have a bit to eat. We’ll rest, make love again, and a plan will unfold before us. It will be the clear choice to make. I am sure of it. We shall leave our fate in the hands of God. Agreed?”

“Yes, for now—agreed.” I sighed with a resolve unsustained by courage.

The small repast seemed less cheerful. There were fewer bubbles in the Cristal. The black bread had developed a layer of crust and the cheese curled at the edges. It was a disaster. My beloved’s return to me was ruined. I went through the motions, aware that we couldn’t think on empty stomachs and rest was imperative.

We ate in silence, drank with less pleasure.

I cleared the tray from the bed and stretched out beside you to rest. With my head on your shoulder, your more than capable arms wrapped around me, I relaxed. You must have drifted to sleep right away. The soft breaths when you exhaled furled the tiny hairs on my forearm where it draped across your smooth chest, and the rhythm of your breathing gave me comfort.

I slept.

***

In a distant dream, I smelled coffee brewing.

When I woke it was early morning but still dark and you were pacing the floor, clearly perplexed and doing what comes naturally to you—problem-solving. You smiled at me and left the room after opening the drapes. The moon, still hanging in the midnight sky, poured in over me. The moonlight was cleansing. Even at this hour, I felt refreshed, ready to start anew.

My heart was wrapped in hope.

You returned with a steaming cup of coffee for each of us and, after sliding it closer to the bed, sat in the wing-back arm chair facing me. Holding your hot cup of coffee with both hands, you leaned over, resting your elbows on your knees. You were very intense and serious.

"How did you sleep, darling?"

"I slept beautifully, Damien. It was peaceful, and recuperative. I feel restored and energized for the first time in months."

"That makes me happy, darling. I have been up most of the night thinking… and watching you sleep. I think I have a plan that will work, Lisbet."

"I knew you would, Damien. I never doubted for one second that we would have options."

"The plan that works the best for me is this: what if we just keep things as they are? I will stay hidden to the world. You return to the company and do whatever you must. You will resume authority and become the presumptive CEO until the board of directors confirms your position. You will be free to make either of the following decisions: you can put the business up for sale and manage it until it sells. I have the names of business associates who have approached me in the past and were interested, so it shouldn't take very long to wrap up a deal. Or, you can set up a management team we trust to run the company, and bank the proceeds in my off-shore account indefinitely. We can disappear together for the length of your lifetime after you sell the company. People would think you wanted to change your life—move—after my death, because it was too painful to remain. No one need know you are carrying our child. Our problem is that, either way, I must continue in hiding and can never return. If I do, Detective

French will kill me sooner or later.

"Or…"

"Or what, darling" I mewed, sipping the hot black nectar.

"I can lure the Detective to a neutral site unrelated to us in any way, kill him, and our life will return to normal. He'll be found and his murder never solved. I will reappear. We'll concoct a story about hitting my head when I was thrown from the boat after it exploded off the coast of Nova Scotia. I was then rescued and nursed back to help by a well-meaning fisherman's wife and family. We will explain my not remembering a thing for months. Something like that. I think it could work. I can go back to the company, you can have our son, and our life will resume the rhythm of our destiny."

"Damien, murder? Have you ever… could you?"

"No, Lisbet, I have never. And yes, I could do anything if it meant protecting you and our son. The money, the business, the connections mean nothing to me. I have plenty of money and more favorable connections than I need. You forget, I have been at this for centuries and amassed great wealth—all of which is replaceable. You, and the baby, are not."

"Murder? I don't know, Damien. The detective lost his wife and was left to raise his three children. They would have no one to love them, to live for them, tuck them in at night and raise them. I don't know if I could do that to three kids just after they lost their mother to cancer. It seems cruel to orphan them."

"Is that what he told you? Lies, all lies. He is a vampire that was indoctrinated as a Dark Knight. He has chosen to use the same powers I possess for what he believes is the welfare of those who sleep in the night. And he has, over the centuries. I know how he works. We were once brethren fighting the forces of evil side by side."

"Then why does he want to kill you?"

"Somehow, he believes I am responsible for the death of his lineage —which I am not. I considered him as a brother, a kindred spirit. We fought back to back in the face of darkness. He saved my life a dozen times, and I his. I would not do him nor his family any harm… ever. My enemies, however, have filled his head with nonsense and deceit

in an effort to get him to do their killing. They have convinced him that I am responsible for the deaths in his family, including his fair sons and beloved wife."

"And were you, Damien? Were you responsible for killing his family and loved ones?"

"You shouldn't have to ask that of me, darling, but no. I was not. I have been trying to convince him for a very, very long time, to no avail, that they are falsehoods. His blood runs too hot for revenge to listen to reason anymore. So, I did the only thing I thought possible—I disappeared. And safely, I might add. These many years, I've hidden in plain sight among the living with you."

"I don't know, Damien; I don't know what we should do. But murder? I don't think I can—could…"

"I know. It is a lot for you to digest. What you must keep in context, my darling, is that the detective is dead already. In point of fact, I would not really be killing him. He would simply dissolve into the darkness and his human body would be lifeless."

"If he is already dead, how could you then 'kill' him?"

"There are several ways, the details of which I will spare you, but anything silver plunged into his heart will stop him."

"But he is your friend…"

"At one time, yes, he was a friend whom I loved like a brother. He has long since become a threat to me and now he is a danger to you and our son. He has left me with no other choice. I cannot let anything happen to you."

"Oh, my love, there must be another way. If not, then I elect for your first option. You will remain in hiding, I will return to work and sell the company. Such drastic action will be understandable to others. They will conclude that it is too painful for me to continue with the business we built together. I will secure the proceeds in your off-shore account and we will disappear—forever. I could not have the detective's death on my conscience, even if he is already dead. He appears to live; I have spoken to him. He was sympathetic to my sorrow and shared his about his wife's death. He even thought I looked as his wife did when she was pregnant with their children, and

suggested I see my doctor."

"He did? He knows you're carrying my child? He was never married, Lisbet; he never had a wife or children. He knows. This puts things into a different perspective. We must decide quickly and act fast if we have any chance of survival."

"Oh, God, Damien. I am so scared. What do you want me to do…?"

"Get dressed. Quickly."

With that, I jumped out of bed, leaving my coffee on the nightstand and ran to the bathroom to wash and dress. I moved furiously and with deliberation to face whatever was to come at us next.

It never occurred to me to think that Damien was the same as the detective. He was also a Prince of Darkness, a member of the undead —a vampire. He was dead, too. *Oh, God, my baby…*

The doorbell rang, followed by a persistent pounding on the door.

***

Damien hollered something at me that I couldn't make out. I hopped out of the dressing room, at once putting my pants on and pulling a T-shirt over my head. My pants had grown tight at the waist —a quick reminder of my priorities. Nothing was going to hurt my baby—no one, nobody, nothing.

"Calm down, Lisbet. Pull yourself together. Let's see what he wants. I will not leave you this time. I'll listen to your every word. You are safe, darling. Trust me. I am here."

"I am terrified, Damien. I can't…"

"You can, and you will. We cannot fight him blindly. Go find out why he is here."

I shored myself up with a false steely reserve. When I got to the door, I yelled through.

"Who is it, please?" I looked through the security peep-hole. The detective stood holding his leather wallet with his gold badge on display.

"Detective French, Ms… Lisbet. May I speak with you a moment? Inside?"

“What is it you want, Detective? It’s early. I’ve not had my morning coffee yet.”

“Let me in, please, Ms. Baylord. It’s official business. Do you want your neighbors to hear?”

“No, of course not, Detective. One moment.” Uncertain of his agenda, nefarious or otherwise, I didn’t want anyone to know he was here at all. I threw the deadbolts, drew a deep breath and slid the chain off of the channel. I opened the door and stepped back.

“What can I help you with, Detective?” My heart hammered in my breast.

“I know your husband is alive, Lisbet. I know a lot of things.”

“Do you, Dick. What is it you think you know about me, my husband and my life?” I thought I sounded scared out of my wits. I tried very hard to steady my knees by spreading my stance. I slid my hands into my pockets to hide their trembling.

“Well, for one thing, I know your husband is still alive. I also know he has been here.” He sniffed the air and leaned in the direction of the master suite.

I moved to block his view into the hallway and down to our bedroom, although I didn’t know if that is where Damien was hidden.

“Furthermore, I know he is here. I can smell him on you—in you, filthy cunt.”

I felt the heat rise in waves to my brow as my face surely flushed. His insinuations scared and infuriated me.

“Jumped right to it, did you, Dick? How dare you. What makes you think Damien is here? What makes you think you are right? He lived here, you pompous ass. Of course, it would smell like him. I have been sleeping with his clothes to keep him close, you son of a bitch. Now, get out of my house.”

I took an involuntary step towards the detective and pointed again to the door.

He ignored my demand and walked past me to the window.

“Nice view. Bet you can see all manner of things flying by—night or day.”

“What do you want, Dick, if that’s your real name?”

Oh, fuck, I tipped my hand. Now he knows that I know, and he knows who told me.

I moved like a chess piece to the dining room, just off the hallway to our ensuite. I braced myself against the buffet table.

“Ahhh, jumped right to it, did you, Lisbet? Where is he?”

Mocking me only heightened my fury and my fear.

“He’s not here, Dick. I keep telling you that.”

“Don’t fuck with me, Miss Lisbet. I have travelled a very long distance to find your husband. My patience is wearing thin, and I am weary. So, let me ask you again. Where is he?

With a bravado I did not feel, I squared my shoulders and narrowed my eyes.

“He isn’t here.”

In one swift and smooth motion, he was at my side, breathing down my collar. His breath was hot and foul. His strong fingers gripped my hair, tearing at the strands until my scalp prickled with pain.

“I am not going to ask you again, my dear. Where’s Damien? Why do you protect him when he is a blood-thirsty killer? Do you want your child to grow up under that kind of influence? To grow up like a man such as him, whose scruples are that of the undead?”

His brow had furled and his eyes turned black. A cold, dark aura came over him. I shivered in response as he released my hair and caressed his fingertips over my shoulder to my breast, down my waist to my belly. But, it was not a loving gesture. I felt threatened and scared for my baby.

“He killed my babies, did he tell you? He killed my unborn baby when he slit my wife’s throat. Do you think I should spare you, or kill you too—and your unborn son by design—because you won’t tell me where he is?”

“Take your hands off of me, you black-hearted bastard!”

“I tremble under your threats. Damien certainly picked a feisty one. Maybe I should see just how feisty you are—in bed, perhaps—and find out what it is Damien loves so much that he would risk eternity to keep you safe from me.”

This man, this evil entity, dragged his hand up from my belly and

cupped my breast in his palm. He tweaked my nipple painfully. I tried to bat his hand away, but he was inhumanly strong. He held hard and fast to my breast, squeezing it painfully.

"Stop, you're hurting me."

"Where is he?"

"I don't know. Stop. You're hurting me."

"Where is he?"

He dropped his left hand to my crotch and grabbed a handful of flesh through my jeans.

"Where is he?"

"I don't know, please stop. You're hurting me."

"You have no idea what I am capable of, but you will find out if you don't tell me where he is."

Silent but swiftly, Damien appeared out of nowhere. I pushed the detective's hand away from my breast, still aching in pain. But, I smiled proudly at him with Damien's appearance.

"Taken to picking on weaker, smaller, people—even women—now, Braekoff?"

"Braekoff?" Their familiarity was unnerving.

"I would hardly say she is weaker, Damien. You chose beautifully. She will give you strong sons, if I allow her to live."

"Take your hands off of her, Braekoff. You don't want to make me angry."

In seconds it began. Braekoff was in front of Damien. I didn't see him move nor feel him release his grasp of my crotch. The two opponents were nose to nose. I feared for my husband. Damien's face turned feral, eyes narrowed and saliva formed in the corners of his mouth. When I saw the detective's face, he had changed and darkened similarly. It looked as though the men were well matched, and I was at a complete loss as to what I should do. They crouched, knees bent in fighter's poses, and circled one another, waiting for the other to make a move.

I gasped in fear which, unfortunately, drew Damien's attention. It was then the detective struck, knocking Damien backwards.

"Damien!"

The two fought ruthlessly, back and forth throughout the apartment, toppling lamps, breaking furniture, slamming against the floor to ceiling panels of glass overlooking the jeweled lights that ignited the city below.

The detective let loose a maniacal laugh. I couldn't help myself, and cried out.

"Damien. Damien!"

The men moved with lightning speed, arms and legs flew. I could barely discern who was who, or what belonged to either man. Damien hit the detective with such strength that he fell against one of the large glass panes, breaking it into a thousand glimmering shards of glass reflecting the jeweled colors of the city below, and tumbled out of the window.

I did not see anything more of him and exhaled a breath that had been trapped in my throat as the men fought. Moments later, a winged black entity swept in through the window. It landed on the sill, wings folded back into its body and transformed, bolting in front of Damien. The men resumed their fight, and fell. Damien was well-matched with the black being.

I held my breath and fell back against the buffet, keeping myself well away from the skirmish. The battle was fierce. The room smelled of burning flesh, blood, sweat and determination. The sudden glint of a silver spike appeared out of thin air, and I froze in mid-motion.

It was not Damien's hand holding the spear but the detective's.

I looked for something to hit him with to give Damien a short advantage, but found nothing.

Then I remembered… I yanked open the buffet drawer and shoved items out of the way until I found my mother's carving set. I grabbed the silver knife and, without a plan of further thought, screamed as I threw myself on the man threatening my husband. I was crazed, desperate to save him now that he was returned to me.

My unexpected attack threw the detective off guard for long enough to stop the decent of the spike. Damien pushed upwards, grabbed the hand with the silver shaft and held fast. As I fell on the bastardly intruder, I plunged the silver carving knife into his heart. I

screamed nonsensical gibberish all the while.

He seemed suspended in time: unmoving, and without resistance.

The black shadow shrouding the detective's face lightened gradually as color returned to his cheeks. His black eyes resumed their sky blue color. The fierce scowl across his brow released its hold, and the furrows softened. His lips, pulled back over the snarling teeth and dried gums of a rabid animal, dropped to a soft smile of acceptance. I recognized the silent surrender as life took flight from his human body.

Blood covered everything.

I screamed for Damien, fearful for his life.

"Here, Lissie." You rolled the detective off your belly and crawled from beneath him. I saw you were bleeding and panicked.

"You're bleeding, Dam. Where are you bleeding? Let me help you."

"I am alright, Lissie, but I might not have been if not for your actions."

"But, where—where are you bleeding from?"

You felt your body quickly, lingering at your left arm and right side, near your waist.

"Don't worry, my love. I am not going to die. It is a few scratches here and I think over here. He was never strong enough to take me on, even as children. But, he always tried, I'll give him that."

"Come, let me help you sit on the couch."

I helped you get comfortable and started to examine your injuries and stop the bleeding. There were several that oozed in a steady stream. I got up, and ran to the bathroom for the first aid kit. When I returned, you were reclined against the back, recuperating.

"Let me see those. What are we going to do now, Damien?" I examined your wounds and, to my surprise, they had stopped bleeding. I watched closely as the skin knit and healed, right before my eyes. "Does that always happen? Do you always heal yourself?"

"Yes, I always heal right away."

"Is he going to heal himself."

"No, Lissie. He isn't coming back. You have nothing to worry about."

A small curl in the corner of your mouth hid the smile that lingered beneath your lips.

“Oh… now what shall we do?”

“Well, I need to consider, but my first thought is that nothing we spoke about earlier will work. Clearly, the noise, the damage, the detective’s body will be tied to you. There is no way to explain this to the authorities. Can you think of any? I can’t.”

“No, I am at a loss. But, he attacked me first.”

“Yes, but why? How can we explain that? How can we explain me?”

“I don’t know.”

“There is one way, and one only, but there is no turning back if we take this route.”

“Tell me. Whatever it is, at least we have an option. We can do it. We can do anything as long as we are together. There is no turning back now. Look around us. Our home is a disaster and there is blood everywhere. The authorities will never believe whatever I tell them. And he…” I gestured towards the detective laying in a pool of his own blood. “…is still a detective to them, even if he was something else to you and I.”

I slid against the backrest of the couch, weary to the bone and trembling from the adrenalin rush of the attack. I felt frozen, locked in place, until we had a feasible plan to save ourselves.

“You will have to come away with me, into my world—join me in the Darkness. We will return to my ancestral home in Ruthenia. There, we can live comfortably. The estate is expansive and you will want for nothing. My family has taken care of the residents in the area, so we are kindly regarded.”

“How would I join you? I have seen movies, but how is it done? And our son…?”

“It is not painful, if that is what you are worried about. I’ll kiss your neck while we make love, and puncture your carotid artery to drink your blood. It sounds crude and painful, but it is not. It is a very sensuous experience. You will grow light headed, the sensation will be more like an out of body experience; then you will fall asleep in my

arms. When you wake, we will be in my—our—home in Ruthenia."

"And the baby?"

"It depends upon how strong the baby is, but I suspect it will be fine. I was."

"Your father and your mother were…?"

"My father was a vampire, but my mother was like you. She chose to spend her life, her eternity with him just as you must decide. They had no trouble with me. I was born into the Darkness, as was my father. But, the decision is yours. I will understand if you choose to stay."

"But, why can't we stay? He is dead now. We have the time to figure out our course of action. We have our home and our business. Doesn't it make more sense to stay, clean up and get back to normal. Isn't that a consideration?"

"It could be, Lissie, but you forget one thing."

"What have I overlooked?"

"If we do nothing, you will grow old and I will stay like this for a very, very long time. It will be centuries before I age. I will have to leave when you need me the most—when you are old. If you come with me now, none of this matters. Our son, most probably, will be fine as will all our future children, and I will never have to leave you. Is that not preferred?"

"Well, when you put it that way… Do we just walk out and leave everything, even him?"

"Yes, that is precisely what I mean. But, we won't walk."

I couldn't imagine what you meant and the lack of understanding must have shown on my face.

"I fly everywhere, Lisbet. I fly quickly and in the velveteen darkness. You will fly in my arms."

"So, when you left earlier, when he returned for his cell phone, you had flown away?"

"Well, sort of. It is similar to being vaporized, and yet flying, too. When he returned the second time, I was there, above the bookcase, watching. He knew I was here, which is why he kept shifting around the room. I thought I needed to be here in case he turned nasty with

you and got rough. I was right."

"I'm not sorry he is gone, but I wish he didn't have to die."

"You were spectacular, a real warrior, Lisbet. He was right about one thing. I did choose well. I can think of nothing I would want more than to spend an eternity with you."

"And I with you. I love you, Damien. I want to be yours forever, darling."

"Are you sure, my love?"

"Yes, I am sure. I will die just as surely without you anyway, and be so unhappy I may even take my own life to join you. If not now, then when? There are no other answers as clear to me as this one."

You rose and scooped me in your arms. I put my head on your shoulder, my arms around your neck, and you walked us to the broken window. The city slumbered quietly and peacefully beneath us. A slight breeze blew my hair across my face. You ran your finger from my hairline, down my temple to my cheek, and brushed my unruly hair back from my face.

"Are you sure, my darling?"

"Kiss me, my love. Take us home, darling, to our sanctuary. We three will be safe then."

***

I am one with the night.
I am one with my love.
The platinum orb rose slowly above the burning, flaming horizon.
Like the moon, I am refreshed, now, in the shadows,
adorned by diamonds and surrounded by
glittering, shooting madness.
The sun so loves the moon that it dies each sunset that the moon
may rise another night to honor the darkness.
I blossom as the day withers and fades into the black satin folds of the moon's embrace.
My joy ignites as the stars unveil their jewel-like splendor.
Inevitably, a midnight tear bids a love so light in darkness adieu with the

fall of the morning moon to welcome her fiery radiance anew.

And I am born to the night with, and by, my love.

Adieu ~

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Muffy, likened in style to one of the Bronte sisters or Anne Rice, is an award-winning, bestselling author of provocative romance about love, sex, hope and passion. An American author of the popular Shadow Seduction Series (a paranormal love story) and the Ribbons of Moonlight Series (a contemporary romance), she has penned a dozen other books and anthology collections.

Muffy was born in Texas to traditional parents. With two older brothers, she was the youngest, the family "princess," indulged and pampered. Her father was a career Colonel and pilot in the U.S. Air Force which required the family to travel extensively. Having spent her formative years in Europe, Muffy 'came of age' in France which forged her joie de vivre and love for books and writing. Married and living in the tropical paradise of SW Florida along the Gulf Coast, Muffy writes and enjoys life in the sun with her husband and wee Havanese pup, Burt.

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Maybe Another Time: A Standalone On The Edge Novella by Kallysten

After a century and a half, Lucien has no illusions about vampires being treated fairly by humans. All he hopes for is to find willing prey to feed from without having to kill—and occasional company to break the monotony of lonely nights. A large scar, however, a frightening souvenir from his siring, scares away many humans, and more often than not he gets kicked out of blood bars and dance clubs for little more than his appearance.

When a new club opens in town that is touted as a meeting place for vampires and humans, he reluctantly gives it a try. On his first night there, he is pleasantly surprised… until the young woman with whom he shares a glass of wine and pleasant conversation at the bar realizes what he is.

If Zoe had had her wish, the bachelorette party for her best friend would have taken place anywhere but at On The Edge—anywhere vampires are not welcomed so openly. Unlike the rest of the bridal party, Zoe has a healthy wariness of vampires... Or could it be more than wariness, and less than healthy?

Every aspect of her life seems governed by patterns she can't overcome, from the way she yields in conflicts to her inability to believe anyone might be interested in her extra curves. Could changing one thing—her fear of vampires—be the one small step that starts her on a new life journey?

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Maybe Another Time
A Standalone On The Edge Novella
By Kallysten
BBW Vampire Romance

CHAPTER ONE

It was a bad idea. No, worse than that. It was an absolutely, catastrophically terrible idea. And Zoe could not, for the life of her, convince her friend Joan to change her mind. Still, she had to try again. This time, she appealed to her financial smarts, since her self-preservation instincts had gone missing.

"There are tons of clubs closer to us. We'd save a lot of money by __"

"I already reserved the hotel suite," Joan interrupted, her voice crackling a little on the cell phone connection. "If you gals think it's too expensive, you don't have to pay your share. I told you I didn't care about that."

"But… the limo service—"

"Izzy is taking care of that, remember? Her brother's giving us a fantastic discount. And we're getting a more than generous discount at the club, too. Brett says it's great publicity. He said he might take some pictures of us if we're cool with that and put them on the club's website, like a 'bachelorette party' section."

Joan sounded excited about that, but Zoe had a hard time suppressing a groan. Great. Not only they would be partying in a club that wanted to be a meeting place for vampires and humans, not only would they have access to alcohol at ridiculously low prices, but on top of it Joan's friend, the club manager, would be taking pictures of their inebriated selves for posterity.

It was almost enough for Zoe to consider begging off the maid of

honor duties.

Almost, but not quite.

Still, she had to try one last time.

"Joan, sweetie… I understand all that, and I see you're excited, but… *vampires?* This club is rumored to be full of them. If anything happened to any of the girls…"

She let the rest of that thought dangle between them. It didn't need to be voiced aloud that should any of her bridesmaids get hurt, Joan would never forgive herself.

For a second or two, Joan remained silent, and a tiny thread of hope started to rise in Zoe. It didn't last long.

"I know you worry about vampires," Joan said softly. "And I understand why you do. But this is *not* a vampire club. It's a dancing club that happens to treat vampires and humans equally. Brett's girlfriend is the co-owner, and she's a vampire. I met her at the opening and she's an absolute doll. Not all vampires are bad, you know."

"I know that," Zoe snapped, and immediately regretted her outburst. "Sorry, I didn't mean to yell at you."

"And I don't mean to push you into doing anything you're not comfortable with." A quiet sigh came through the phone. "Listen, if it bothers you that much… I don't want this to be an issue between us. Is there another place you think would be better in Haventown? We'd still get the five-star hotel experience but without getting too close to vampires."

It was what Zoe had wanted when she first called Joan to share her doubts about the bachelorette party, but now that Joan was offering her a compromise, Zoe felt terrible about making a fuss.

She'd been so surprised when Joan had asked her to be her maid of honor—and so happy. They were best friends, certainly, but Zoe's own sister had passed her over, and in fact had excluded her from her bridal party altogether with claims that 'she wanted to keep it small.'

Small in numbers, but also small in size, Zoe knew all too well. The three slender bridesmaids had looked gorgeous in their tight sheaths. Zoe would have looked ridiculous in one of those. Joan had not only

asked her, but she'd given her bridesmaids a choice between several dress styles so that Zoe would wear something that flattered her body without the other girls being resentful that they were forced into something that might not look so good on their more slender frames. And now Joan was willing to alter her plans because of Zoe's hang ups… Never mind Bridezilla, Zoe was starting to feel like 'Maidzilla.'

"You know what," she said with a bit of forced cheer in her voice, "forget I said anything. I'm sure we'll have a great time at On The Edge. I guess I was channeling my dad and Jack."

"Only if you're sure," Joan insisted.

"I am completely sure. I'll come by tomorrow to make the favors. Three-ish?"

"Sounds good. Thank you, sweetie. See you tomorrow."

The call disconnected, and for a moment Zoe didn't move, keeping the phone at her ear and staring unseeingly at the ceiling, the entire conversation replaying through her mind. She'd had a plan when she called, arguments lined up to change Joan's mind. All that for nothing. Extending her arm past the edge of the sofa, she dropped the phone to the carpet. She drew a pillow over her face and, pressing it there, let out a long, frustrated cry.

She'd done it again.

After telling herself she would stop caving in to her friends' requests, would stop thinking that she owed them because they were good enough to grant her their friendship, she'd still flung her self-esteem out the window and yielded, yet again. And Joan would think nothing of it, because she was a good friend, and she had given Zoe what she wanted, only for Zoe to pretend it hadn't been that important for her after all.

"Just because you take up more physical space than someone doesn't mean your feelings and desires should be proportionally smaller to theirs," her therapist had told her months ago. He'd repeated the same thing in various ways every session after that, but that first phrasing had stuck with Zoe, and she repeated it to herself at least once a day.

And still, there she was again, discounting her own opinion because

she never felt worthy.

For a moment, she was tempted to call Joan again and tell her that no, it wasn't only her dad's ideas she was parroting, and people didn't need to have lived with a Special Enforcer to understand that vampires could be dangerous. Not all vampires, maybe, and she accepted that Brett's girlfriend might be lovely, but that didn't mean all of her vampire customers would be.

However, for all that she repeated to herself what she could have told Joan, she didn't call her back, and she knew already that she wouldn't mention the topic again when they met the next day to stuff small favor bags with candied almonds and sugar pearls.

Getting up from the sofa, she glared at the phone as she picked it up as though it were responsible for her weakness, but she knew she had no one to blame but herself. She left the phone in the kitchen when she filled her water bottle. Her bridesmaid dress was hanging from the door pull of the fridge, the plastic cover crinkling every time she brushed against it.

With two weeks to go before the wedding, she had long ago abandoned the idea that she might be miraculously slim by the time she had to wear the dress. Still, she had purposefully requested that the dress be made a little too tight for comfort, an incentive to keep working out and watching her food intake until the wedding.

Afterward… she intended to find a way to keep motivating herself. She'd never be a size zero like her sister, but at least she could keep herself healthy. At her last check up, the doctor had been pleased by her results. He'd told her to forget the number on the scale and keep making smart choices because all of her tests were excellent and she was fine the way she was.

Easy for him to say. He didn't have to buy professional clothes that didn't come in his size and pay for alterations.

Water bottle in hand, she took the stairs to the ground floor of her apartment building. It was a little farther from her job at the bank than she'd have wished, but she'd chosen it because of the gym it offered, the membership fees included in the rent.

At this late hour of the afternoon, she wasn't surprised to find it

busy, every other treadmill, bike and other various machines already humming as it was used. She nodded at a couple of neighbors, but deliberately set herself aside, away from conversation as well as out of earshot of the two televisions mounted on the walls. She didn't come here to socialize, she repeated to herself, and climbed on an elliptical exercise machine, setting her water bottle in the holder.

For the next hour, she worked out to the sound of her increasingly fast breathing, taking sips every few minutes like clockwork. The gym had filled up a little more as people came home from work, and she was now sandwiched between the woman from 5C—a teacher, Zoe knew—and a man she'd never seen before. Either he was new to the building or he didn't usually come at this hour.

He kept leaning forward and looking to his left as he worked the machine. At first, Zoe thought he was looking at her, which she found vaguely off-putting. Sweaty and, she was sure, red-faced, wearing an extra large t-shirt and sweatpants, her long hair bound in a braid that was starting to fall apart, she hardly felt attractive—not that she often felt attractive in any case.

When she risked a look at him, however, she realized that it wasn't her attention he was trying to get, but Miss 5C's on her other side. She let out a snort in between her harsh breaths. Typical; he seemed to think she was invisible.

After a while, the bike on the other side of 5C opened up, and the man switched machines. Zoe smiled inwardly and wished him good luck. She couldn't know for sure, of course, but after months of coming here, observing and listening, she was fairly certain that he was the wrong gender to get 5C's interest.

Fatigue had begun to burn in her legs and arms but she pushed on, eyeing the numbers on the machine's display. After some research, she'd learned that the 'calories burned' number was never all that accurate, but it still felt good to watch it go higher and higher, the numbers climbing a little faster whenever she made an extra effort. It was the number above that however that would tell her when she could stop: ninety minutes was her daily goal, and right now the display showed seventy-four, the seconds trickling by so slowly that

she could have believed the machine was malfunctioning.

"Evening, Zoe."

She turned to her left as her name pierced through the rush of blood beating in her ears. She smiled automatically as she saw Jim, Mister 2B, climb on the machine Mister Stare-A-Lot had abandoned.

"Hey," was all she could say, as out of breath as she was. She slowed down a little to get a gulp of water.

"Been here a while, huh?" he said, taking an ostensible look at her display.

"Trying to stick to the schedule," she panted. "You're later than usual."

"Work."

He started his routine warm up, going slowly at first and gradually increasing the resistance of the machine so that soon his effort was visible. He'd given her tips when she'd first ventured off the familiar treadmill and onto the elliptical instead, but she was far from reaching his level of comfort with the machine. Still, she could now keep a fairly good pace at level six out of ten. Small victories.

With ten minutes to go before an hour and half, she pushed the resistance up to seven and tried to keep the same pace for a full two minutes. After that, she began winding down, decreasing the resistance and her speed every time a new minute passed, so that when the clock display hit ninety she was at the lowest level and soon coming to a stop. She drank again, this time emptying her water bottle, and noticed that Jim was slowing down and stopping as well. Strange, she thought. He'd just started.

"So, doing anything this weekend?" he asked.

"Not much. Just helping with the wedding preparations again."

"Ah, yes. That should be pretty soon, no?"

She nodded. "This weekend we finish preparing the favors and decorations. Next weekend is the bachelorette party, and the weekend after that, the actual wedding."

He laughed a little.

"Busy bee. Between that and the bank, you can't have a lot of time to go out and relax. I've been a bit overworked myself and I've been

itching to take a night out. Say, how do you feel about vegan cuisine? There's this new restaurant a few blocks away that's getting great reviews. I've got nothing against a good burger myself, but I like to try new tastes now and then. How about you?"

The tirade came out in a rush and Zoe had the feeling Jim had rehearsed it. The glint of expectation in his eyes as he waited for her to answer reinforced that impression, and she realized with a pang of shock that he'd asked her out.

Or had he?

No, that couldn't be. They were friendly, sure, and they often chit-chatted before or after their work-outs, but he didn't look at her that way. He *couldn't* look at her that way, not when he never saw her as anything other than a sweaty mess. She was imagining it, that was all. The last thing she needed was to make things awkward by believing he was asking her out when he was just making conversation. As if he didn't have much better options than her, right here in this room.

"I can't say I've got much experience with vegan food," she admitted. "You'll have to tell me how it was. See you."

With a smile, she took her leave, passing by Miss 5C who had put on earphones and was steadily ignoring Mister Stare-A-Lot's attempts to catch her eye. Of course Jim hadn't been hitting on her. What a silly idea. That was something that happened to the other girls here, but not to her.

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CHAPTER TWO

"And are you serving blood?"

Across from Lucien, Lisa's pretty face briefly twisted into a grimace of displeasure, so that he knew what she'd answer before she spoke.

"Not at this time, no." The words came out with difficulty; they cost her. "We will once we get a blood license, but that's taking longer than we expected."

He leaned back into the thick, plush leather-covered bench and considered her as he took a slow sip from his glass, a mix of blood and alcohol. He added up what she'd said, what he'd read between the lines, and what he knew for having lived a century and a half.

He didn't know how old she was exactly, they were friendly but not quite so close that he might ask such a personal question. Still, he'd always supposed she wasn't as old as he was—and her reaction right now reinforced that guess. She hadn't yet resigned herself to the fact that, for all that vampires were in name the equal of humans in front of the law, the reality remained very different.

"The authorities are making difficulties because you've got fangs, huh?" he said with a touch of derision in his words.

She stiffened at once, her head snapping back so fast that her blond hair swung on her shoulders. Her eyes were narrowing dangerously. He placated her with a hand raised palm out toward her.

"I'm not mocking you," he assured her. "I'm just not as surprised as you seem to be that the authorities make difficulties for a business owner who's a vampire, even if her partner is a human. Have you considered putting things in his name only? Of course you'd have to trust him not to turn on you and stab you in the back."

She relaxed, but not much.

"We're considering it," she said stiffly. "We'll see how much longer getting that license takes, and decide from there."

"So you do trust him," he said, a little surprised.

Most vampires he knew didn't care to associate that closely with humans for business when it was so easy for humans to screw them over.

Unless there was already some screwing going on, non-metaphorical, this one.

"Ah," he said with a slight smile. "He's that kind of partner, huh? Blood, pleasure and business, all mixed into one. I don't know whether to admire you or call you crazy."

For a second, she looked like she would correct him, but whatever she was about to say disappeared in a slight shrug. She finished her drink and licked her bottom lip.

"Call me crazy if you want, but at least I drink my fill every night. No more getting thrown out of bars or having to pay someone to find a prey for me. Be honest, now. Aren't you tired of blood bars?"

He was. God, he really was. But what was the alternative? Her club? She made it sound nice, but he had a hard time believing humans there were as friendly as she claimed. Going back to his old ways of feeding, however, was not in the cards.

"Maybe I like the drinks here," he muttered, raising his glass as though in a toast, but she wasn't looking at him.

He followed her gaze and watched a waitress walk toward their table, escorting a young man whose heartbeat revealed both his fear and excitement. He looked up toward them, his eyes passing over Lucien but lingering onto Lisa long enough to reveal his interest. No doubt he'd asked for a woman; unfortunately for him, of the three vampire women on the premises at that moment, one was entertaining her regular prey in a curtained booth nearby, a second one was waiting for a favorite a little farther away, and the third one, Lisa, made no secret of her dislike for blood bars. In truth, Lucien didn't like them much either, but he always hoped that he, too, might eventually get 'regulars' who enjoyed sharing a few moments with him.

"Mister Luke," the waitress said as she stopped by their booth, inclining her head in greeting. "May I introduce you to—"

Lucien never got to know what the young man's name was. As soon

as the human realized he was about to be served on a platter to a man rather than a woman, he turned crimson and grabbed the waitress' sleeve, tugging urgently until she looked back at him.

"I asked for a woman," he said in a whisper that might as well have been a shout for how loudly it rang in Lucien's ears.

The waitress' expression didn't change, but Lucien could detect a whiff of annoyance rising in her scent. About half of the humans she brought to Lucien's table changed their minds when they saw him.

"As I explained when you signed in," she said patiently, "we cannot guarantee that your preferences—"

"I've changed my mind. I can't do this. I'm not…"

He didn't finish, but turned on his heel and hurried away toward the exit. The waitress faced Lucien, her expression still smooth but exasperation filling her eyes. She wouldn't comment on the situation, but he could guess what she was thinking: why did he continue to come here when he was so often rejected?

"May I refresh your drinks?" she asked, and turned away when both Lucien and Lisa declined.

He brought the half empty glass back to his lips and took a slow sip, waiting for Lisa to say something. Would she mock his choice to come here to find blood? Would she commiserate? Would she ask how often he went home after having drunk blood from nothing more than a glass?

"I've got to go," she said instead, adding with the flash of a smile, "More bars to visit, more customers to poach. I hope you decide to give us a try, if only for the chance to have a drink on the house."

She slid a laminated card across the table and stood, picking up her jacket from the bench.

"We might not have blood at the bar yet, but we have an excellent wine list. Good night, Lucien."

He nodded to her in guise of goodbye and waited until she'd stepped away before he picked up the card. Slightly larger than a business card, it bore simple black letters on a red and blue background.

'*Voucher for a free drink at the bar in the dancing club On The Edge,*

compliments of the managers.

Vampires and humans equally welcome.'

With a shake of his head, he set the card back down on the table and picked up his glass once more, this time to finish it. 'Equally welcome,' in his experience, meant very little. Haventown might be touted as the most friendly place for vampires in the Unites States, but what was much less well known was that the city boasted a higher than average number of Special Enforcers per capita. Vampires may be welcome, but they were also looked at suspiciously, as they'd been for as long as Lucien could remember.

Setting his empty glass back down, he looked around for a waitress. It seemed somewhat unlikely at this point, seeing how few humans were showing up tonight, that he'd end up with a willing prey; it was the middle of the week, and they usually came in more numbers on weekends. He might as well get more blood before going home.

Staff always remained in sight, both to be available to take orders and to keep an eye on what was happening, ready to intervene should a vampire go too far. He caught the eye of the woman who'd brought him his first drink and raised his empty glass to show it to her. She nodded her understanding and walked toward the bar.

She didn't bring him his order, however, and instead a man did. Middle-aged and balding, he wore a suit with casual ease. Lucien had seen him there before, but he hadn't known who he was until the man set the glass on the table with a smile and said, "Good evening, sir. My name is Dan Anston, I'm the manager here. Would you mind if I joined you for a few minutes?"

Usually, people asking to join him meant they would soon offer him their blood, but Lucien had a feeling this wouldn't be the case now. He thought he knew what this was about, and in truth he'd been expecting it for a while.

Keeping his expression neutral, he gestured for the man to take the seat Lisa had vacated and picked up his drink. He suddenly wished he'd asked for straight alcohol, he didn't feel very hungry anymore.

"How can I help you, Mr. Anston?"

The manager gave a wan smile, linking his fingers together on the

table in front of him.

"Well, I hope it is I who will be able to help you, sir. We've noticed since you became a patron of the Crimson Drop that you often leave without getting paired up with one of our human customers. I wondered if you'd thought about how a little makeover might improve your chances."

"A makeover," Lucien repeated flatly.

This wasn't what he'd expected. It was worse.

Anston pulled a business card from an inside pocket of his suit and set it on the table, next to the laminated card that Lisa had left behind. His fingers brushed against the laminated card as though he wished to pick it up but he didn't, and his hands returned to their first position, linked in that outwardly serene gesture that didn't quite match his scent.

Lucien didn't look at the business card or pick it up, keeping instead his gaze straight at Anston, waiting for him to explain himself.

Anston's thin smile wavered, but it soon firmed up again.

"This is the number for a very special boutique downtown. They're very good at helping people remake their image. They have an excellent plastic surgeon on staff who works miracle on scars and stylists that can do wonders both on their customers' physical appearance and on their wardrobe. Some of our patrons have used their services before, and they were very satisfied with how small changes allowed them to attract more humans to their table."

The abrupt realization of what Anston was talking about left a bitter taste on Lucien's tongue. He tried to chase it away with a few swallows from his drink, but the mix seemed rank suddenly, as though the blood had turned bad.

"Some of your patrons," he repeated with a sneer. "How many debased themselves in such a way to be more attractive?"

This time, Anston's smile vanished completely.

"I couldn't divulge," he started, but Lucien stopped him right away.

"You just *did* divulge. You might as well do it properly. How. Many?"

Anston gulped. His fingers tightened over each other until his

knuckles turned white.

"Well, one to date, but he was very satisfied with…"

He trailed off under the intensity of Lucien's glare and cleared his throat.

"Well," he said again, "the fact of the matter is, our owner has noticed in nightly reports that you seem to… intimidate our human customers. I'm sure you've noticed that a fair number change their mind when they see you, and that is why I… I mean *he* suggested we mention the boutique to you."

He looked down to the business card, as though by staring at it hard enough he might move it a little closer to Lucien.

"My thanks to your owner for being so considerate," Lucien said, injecting as much sarcasm in his words as he possibly could, "but I think I'll pass."

If Anston had seemed perfectly cool and collected when he first arrived, now his forehead shone with sweat. It wasn't only the customers that Lucien intimidated.

"Well, in that case…" He licked his lips nervously. "I regret that I'll have to ask you not to come to the Crimson Drop again. To be blunt, you're bad for business, and we cannot afford to scare new human customers away on their first visit, as happened tonight for example. The probability that the young man will return…"

He'd been speaking faster and faster, going through what was clearly a prepared speech, and only came to an abrupt halt when Lucien stood. His eyes widened as he looked up. What did he expect? The Crimson Drop boasted that no human had ever been attacked or injured on its premises; did he think he'd be the first?

Without a word, Lucien pulled out his wallet and threw a couple of bills on the table. Anston looked at the bills and opened his mouth, but if his tiny shake of head was to be followed by an offer of drinks on the house, it didn't materialize. Snorting to himself, Lucien grabbed his jacket and slipped it on. He started walking away from the booth, but changed his mind and came back, leaning close to Anston who had started to relax but now turned stiff as a board again.

"You're lucky I'm not very hungry," Lucien said, and if the words

were no louder than a whisper, they still came out as a threat.

Anston actually let out a small squeaking sound and scrunched his eyes shut, as though that might protect him if Lucien decided to tear into his throat. Lucien could have scoffed, but didn't; he'd been so foolish once himself. He still had the scars to show for it.

On a whim, he grabbed the laminated card and slipped it in his pocket. A free drink couldn't hurt.

The 'boutique' card, on the other hand, he left behind.

As he strode through the bar, he crossed paths with a waitress escorting a woman. The waitress offered an empty, pleasant smile and a slight nod, but the woman's eyes grew huge as she took in Lucien's appearance, and she shrunk visibly, clutching her purse and hunching her shoulders as though to protect both her valuables and her blood. He couldn't help but scowl at her reaction, though it was hardly the first time he'd seen that look of fear in human eyes.

He knew what the problem was, of course. He'd known for quite a long time that he embodied every bad cliché about what a murderous vampire might look like. Taller than average and with broad shoulders, he looked like one of the 'muscle' characters in old cinema noir movies, ready to do violence at the slightest provocation. Those who could look past this first impression of sheer mass and at his dark eyes, dark hair and olive complexion sometimes looked interested enough, but invariably when they saw his neck—when they saw the jagged scar there, still prominent after a century and a half—they looked away in fright. It was as though this large scar warned every human who saw it: *look away! This man had his throat torn out, and he lived to tell the tale! Don't look too closely or he might do the same to you.*

Some tried their luck anyway, maybe for the thrill of danger, but many wanted nothing to do with him. After so long, he didn't even blame them anymore. His Sire had cursed him in more ways than one when he'd chosen him, and Lucien had eternity in front of him to pay for his mistakes.

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CHAPTER THREE

The elliptical rumbled under Zoe's efforts, its noises as regular as a heartbeat. She liked days like this one, when work went smoothly, when no unanswerable questions plagued her mind, when exercising felt… well, not good, exactly. She'd never reached that elusive state she'd heard described about exercise becoming something she'd enjoy and crave, but at least today she didn't feel like climbing off the machine after each push of her arms and legs, and her eyes weren't glued to the time display in the silly hope of making it go faster.

If her years of therapy had taught her anything, it was to analyze her moods, and she knew why she felt so good at the moment: only one more day at work, and then she, Joan and a gaggle of their friends would be on their way for the bachelorette party. She replayed the schedule in her mind, her anticipation growing every time she thought about it.

They'd leave town after lunch in a limo big enough for all ten of them. The couple of hours on the road to Haventown would be spent playing silly games to get in the mood, and they'd keep on in that vein once they checked into the hotel. They'd have dinner at a restaurant downtown, and finally head to the club at nightfall. This was the only sticky point for Zoe. She'd tried to bring up the subject again with Joan, but hadn't managed to. After all, she had told Joan that it wasn't such a big issue for her.

So, she'd made a plan. She'd be careful to dance only with the other girls, she'd stay close to people at all times, and she'd veer clear of anyone who might be a vampire.

Her pace slowed down as her mood shifted. Vampires had always made her uncomfortable, more so than most people. She didn't think of herself as prejudiced—after all, one of the managers at the branch was a vampire, and she worked with him without trouble when she had to—but just the same, she was never fully comfortable when she

knew vampires were around.

Maybe her self-preservation instincts were stronger than most people's; or maybe she knew better than most how dangerous vampires could be. After all, she'd spent all her childhood waiting for her father to come home from his patrols and hoping no one would have hurt him. When he'd retired from his job as a Special Enforcer, she'd had to hide how relieved she was. And then she'd started to worry about her brother Jack, who was only two years older than she was and who'd decided to follow in their father's footsteps.

"Winding down?" Jim's voice suddenly interrupted her train of thoughts. "A bit earlier than usual, isn't it?"

She started, her head jerking up, and realized that she'd indeed allowed her unsettled thoughts to push her arms and legs toward inertia. She started accelerating again.

"No, just distracted," she said with a rueful smile. "I shouldn't let my mind wander so much."

"Oh?" He climbed on the machine next to her and started his warm up. "What has you so wound up, then? Wait, don't tell me. The wedding?"

He was only right in a very peripheral way, but she nodded anyway, unwilling to delve into her feelings toward vampires with her exercise buddy, however friendly he might be.

"Just a little over a week now," he mused. "Did you get a date yet?"

The question took Zoe by surprise, and yet again she started slowing down before catching herself and pushing on. She'd told Jim a lot about the wedding as he encouraged her to share what she was up to, and in return he'd told her about his job in an architect firm that worked for the city. But neither of them had ever gone on to talk about dates and significant others. That seemed too much for exercise buddies… wasn't it? Still, she didn't know how not to answer without being rude, so she tried to sound aloof when she said, "Oh, I'm not bringing a date. Joan and Brad stretched their budget as much as they could, so there's no 'plus one' unless people have been together for a while."

Which had the advantage of being true, but it didn't seem to satisfy

Jim.

"Well, you're the maid of honor. I'm sure if you asked for an extra person to come with you, your friend would be fine with it."

Zoe didn't think so herself. She'd helped Joan with the guests list and had seen her agonize about cutting it down to a reasonable size. She answered with nothing more than a noncommittal hum and focused on her exercising, her eyes now intent on the display. Sixty-five minutes. More than two thirds of the way done.

Jim, however, still wasn't finished with the subject.

"You're going to get all this scrutiny, being the maid of honor and all. You're gonna be center stage, only second to the bride and groom, and people won't wonder about *their* love lives, obviously. But they'll wonder about yours. If you go alone, they'll think you can't get a date."

Once more, Zoe found herself slowing down, but she couldn't manage to care anymore. She was staring at Jim, wondering why he was saying all this—and with a pleasant smile, like they were just chit-chatting as usual.

"I'm not sure…" she started, but she didn't know how to finish.

'Not sure it's any of your business' would be accurate if harsh. 'Not sure you realize you sound a bit mean right now' would be too whiny. 'Not sure at all the guests will give a damn about my love life'… Well, the truth was that she'd asked herself if they would. She knew a lot of the guests as she and Joan had many friends in common, and she also knew most of them were bringing dates. So were seven of the bridesmaids—the last one had just broken up with her boyfriend. Zoe had tried not to think about it, but she would be one of the few single people there.

"People can be so mean," Jim went on, oblivious to her discomfort. "First they wonder about your love life, then they wonder why you're the maid of honor, and it's a quick leap to think maybe your friend chose you to set you up with someone. Is the best man single? If he is, I bet she'll try to push you toward him."

With a tilt of his head, he threw her a questioning smile.

"But maybe you wouldn't mind that?"

She had no idea what to say. He looked and sounded like it was all just small talk to make time pass faster. Did he truly not realize how his words could be interpreted? As though she needed to be set up to find a date. As though Joan had chosen her as her maid of honor because she felt pity for her for some reason.

And the reason didn't even need to be voiced, did it?

She let her pace continue to slow down and finally stopped, frowning at the flashing display. She remembered that she'd gripped to Joan, almost three years ago, about how her own sister had cut her out of the wedding party but was still expecting her to help with the planning. And Joan, sweet Joan, always one to help and offer comfort, had asked Zoe to be her maid of honor a mere year and a half after that.

What if she'd remembered Zoe's disappointment? What if she'd taken pity on her and chosen her for that reason rather than any other?

Barely realizing what she was doing, Zoe picked up the water bottle from the holder and drank deeply, but somehow the taste of bile remained at the back of her throat.

"Zoe? Are you all right?"

The repeated sound of her name broke through the veil of questions suddenly shrouding everything, and, blinking away the extra moisture in her eyes, she looked at Jim. He'd slowed down, but was still going as he looked at her with concern.

"I'm fine," she said. "Just… tired. It's been a really long week."

She climbed off the machine, troubled and now feeling out of place, the way she always did when her weight bothered her more than usual.

"I'll see you next time, then," Jim said. "And you know, if you decide you want a date after all, I wouldn't mind being your arm candy."

She thought he was joking, but his smile, half shy, half hopeful, suggested otherwise. Zoe smiled back automatically, but she walked away without another word, her confusion only redoubling. Had he just suggested that she take him to the wedding as her date? After all

but implying that she was unable to get a date on her own?

She didn't get it. He was always so nice, so friendly toward her, and twice now he'd suggested a restaurant outing that she'd declined. She'd decided not to see those offers as him asking her out, but after he had all but suggested himself as a date for her, she wasn't so sure anymore. And at the same time, if he truly was interested in her, if that was the reason why he'd been so friendly since they'd met, how could he have said those things about what people would think if she went to the wedding alone? Did he truly not realize how hurtful he'd been?

The same questions turned through her mind, round and round, for the rest of the evening. Even after she went to bed with a good book she still wondered, with no way to figure out what he'd been thinking and a growing ache in the middle of her chest. Her dreams, that night, were filled with mocking laughter and loneliness.

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Lucien could tell, before the girl even opened her mouth, that she'd be trouble. And she was a girl, not a woman. The red plastic band, tight on her wrist and impossible to remove without mangling it, signified that she was too young to be served alcohol. Lucien stayed away from those, and only approached people whose green band meant they were older, like the girl's friend, seated at the high table next to him and who'd been chatting with him—flirting, really—for the past few minutes.

"Why are you talking to that freak, Laura?" the girl said, planting herself next to her friend and glaring at Lucien over the table.

Laura immediately looked shocked at the girl's language.

"Hey, don't call him—"

"I'll call him whatever I want," the girl cut in harshly, still glaring. "No reflection in the mirrors. You know what that means. And don't say you've never called vampires freaks, I've heard you often enough."

Leaning back in his chair, Lucien couldn't help glancing up at the square mirrors set in groups of four on the ceiling. To an outsider's

eye, it might have looked like a design choice, maybe an attempt to make the club brighter. The truth was that the mirrors were meant to be used the way the girl just had: to spot vampires.

"Not all vampires," Laura muttered toward her friend after throwing an uncomfortable glance at Lucien. "Luke is fine."

The girl forced out a too-loud laugh.

"Fine? Don't be stupid. You know what he's after. He'll leave your neck in the same state as his. Freak."

For a second, Lucien thought about standing up for himself, but what was the point? He'd come to this club for the past three nights, and while Laura was the only person who hadn't looked at him as though he murdered kittens in his spare time, she'd prefaced their conversation with a warning that she wasn't 'into biting, or any of that kinky stuff.'

Lucien hadn't asked what 'kinky stuff' she was referring to; after too many nights in which he didn't speak to anyone other than to order a drink, the prospect of a simple chat was too good a chance to pass. The younger girl was unlikely to let Laura keep on talking to him, however, not when she glared so vehemently. Besides, any second now—

"Sir, I'll have to ask you to leave the premises."

There. Right on cue. The smallest hint of trouble involving a vampire—and sometimes, no hint of trouble at all—was always dealt with in the same way in clubs such as this one: the vampire was invited to leave, with varying degrees of politeness and force.

The bouncer had approached from behind and now stood next to the table, partially blocking Lucien's view of Laura. It was as useless to argue with him as it'd been to try to reason with the underage girl, but Lucien couldn't help offering a small act of defiance, leaning sideways to catch Laura's eye and give her a smile.

"It was a pleasure to talk to you. Maybe we'll meet again another time."

The way she dropped her gaze and did not reply was answer enough.

"Sir," the bouncer said warningly. His hand rose as though he

meant to grab Lucien's arm.

Lucien jerked back and stepped down from the high chair, glaring at the man.

"Keep your hands off me. I heard you the first time."

At the way the bouncer wavered, as though he wanted very badly to step back but forced himself to hold his ground, Lucien knew his eyes had to be glowing with his anger. Without trying to control it, he turned away and walked toward the exit, tearing off the band on his wrist and dropping it to the floor. Even with the blaring music, he still heard the insult thrown at him, like a knife hurled at his back.

"Freak!"

He didn't slow down or look back, but his fists were closed tight when he walked into the street, and they didn't open again until he was home.

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CHAPTER FOUR

When he first reached the street he'd been walking to, Lucien thought that he must have lost his way somewhere. This seemed like the completely wrong neighborhood for a dancing club. Long, tall brick buildings lined both sides of the street, except for an empty space ahead. This had once been a manufacturing neighborhood, and like in many cities, it was now little more than empty factories waiting to be demolished or re-purposed. With nothing more than the glow of a half-moon and a few streetlights, it seemed downright gloomy, and even unwelcoming.

A glimmer of blue caught his attention however, and as he read the sign proclaiming 'On The Edge,' the neon turned to a deep crimson before cycling back to blue. So, he wasn't lost. No wonder Lisa had to go around the bars in town trying to drum up new business. Who in their right mind would want to come party here?

As he came closer, however, he started to wonder if Lisa and her business partner might understand something about partiers that he didn't. What he'd thought was an empty space turned out to be a parking lot, and it looked pretty full. There even was a long, white limo parked on the street, a driver visible inside as the glow of his phone illuminated him.

Lucien hadn't yet reached the entrance when he started to hear the music. Passable, he supposed, though he much preferred blues and jazz to rock. Ah well, in a dance club he'd have to take whatever the DJ threw at the crowd.

He reached the entrance at the same time as a couple of young women wearing equally short dresses and the same naughty gleam in their eyes. He held the door open for them, expecting them to scamper away when they took a good look at him. Neither did, however. They thanked him with smiles, and the brunette of the pair actually winked at him.

That small wink startled him enough that he remained frozen for a few seconds, still holding the door. He finally shook himself into motion and followed the two women inside. They were already disappearing down a staircase on the left side of the main floor. Surely he had to have imagined that wink.

Though the room was wide, sixty or seventy yards across and maybe half that deep, he couldn't see anyone dancing anywhere, which for a dancing club seemed rather strange. Unless… He approached the same staircase the girls had taken and peered down over the guardrail. He couldn't see all the way down as there seemed to be turns and platforms in the way, but the music came from down there—presumably the dance floor. He'd explore in a moment, but for now he was in the mood to get his free drink.

The bar stood in the middle of the main floor, a square counter lined with high stools surrounding two bartenders. Metal and glass tables and matching scrollwork metal chairs were spread out around the bar. Booths lined the back of the room, some of them made private by sheer curtains that had been drawn to hide whoever was at the table.

He had to admit it was a nice space, well lit, easy to navigate, and more inviting than he'd first thought. About half the tables were currently occupied, including five that had been pushed together to form a long table for ten young women. There were all dressed in the same teal t-shirt emblazoned with their first names on the back like a sport jersey, except for the woman seated at the center of the table in a white t-shirt marked 'Bride' on the front She wore a plastic tiara that looked like a toy, and a smile that could have lit the entire room if the electricity went out.

Lucien took a seat at the bar counter with his back to the group. As he waited for a bartender to approach him, he could hear them laughing behind him as they played some kind of game. One thing was sure, the ambiance here was light-years away from the quiet, sedate atmosphere of the Crimson Drop.

"Evening, sir. What can I get you?"

The barmaid on the other side of the counter gave him a frank

smile as she waited for his answer, and while he saw her eyes drift briefly toward his neck, she gave no outward sign of fear, revulsion, or even pity. Lisa had trained her staff well.

He pulled the card from his pocket and laid it on the counter.

“Lisa mentioned you have an excellent wine selection. Do you have a list to show me?”

“Sure thing.”

She reached for a leather-encased booklet under the counter and handed it to him. She didn’t set it down on the counter, he noticed, but actually put it in his hand.

“Do you need a minute to look at it or do you have a question for me maybe?”

“A minute or two sounds good,” he said, impressed despite himself by the selection he found when he opened the wine list. “I’ll let you know when I’m ready.”

He started running a finger down the list of reds, stopping here and there to check the price of a particular bottle. Behind him, the group was still laughing until an authoritative voice—the bride, maybe?—said a little louder to be heard over the giggles, “All right, ladies. Time to go vampire hunting. Back here in ten minutes, and whoever returns with the sexiest vampire wins!”

There was some squabbling as to who would decide on the degrees of sexiness, whether female vampires were within the rules, and whether a ‘really hunky piece of human masculinity’ might be an acceptable substitute, and then the group left the table in a clatter of chairs and giggles. Abandoning for a second his perusing of the wine list, Lucien turned to watch them go and wondered if it was worth it to go down with them and see if one of them would care to ‘hunt’ him.

He ended up snorting to himself and returning his attention to Cabernets and Sauvignons. Who was he kidding? Just because one girl might have winked at him, and just because this group seemed intent on meeting vampires, if only for their game, it didn’t mean that this place was any different from other clubs or blood bars.

He ended up choosing a red, not the most expensive on the list, but

a good year, and closed the folder to signal to the barmaid he was ready to order. She caught his eye from the other end of the bar where she was helping another customer and nodded once to show she'd be with him soon.

"Is that the wine list? May I see it please?"

He turned to his left, where a woman had taken the empty stool between Lucien and another man. She was wearing one of those teal t-shirts, though she'd paired it with jeans rather than the skirts or shorts the other girls were sporting. She had much more generous curves than her cohorts, and the t-shirt was stretched tight across her chest, revealing the outline of her bra. She had just a touch of make-up on, a golden shadow over her eyelids that brightened her deep brown eyes and a mere shimmer of pink on her lips that accentuated the sensual curve of her mouth. He wouldn't mind being her prey in that game, he thought to himself.

However, when, without a word, he slipped the folder toward her, she merely flashed him an absentminded smile and started to look through the list of wines. She was on his left; she might not have seen his scar and realized what he was.

"You're not going to hunt vampires with your friends?" he couldn't help asking.

She looked back up at him, still smiling though now it seemed forced.

"Nah, I don't think so. I prefer my men hot-blooded, if you know what I mean."

A chuckle passed Lucien's lips, redoubling when she blushed and quickly added, "And I swear that wasn't a pick up line. God, maybe I've had too much to drink already."

She closed the folder and started to slip off the stool. Lucien couldn't have said why he covered her hand with his on the counter, stopping her.

"I'm about to ask the barmaid to open a fairly expensive bottle of wine," he said when she raised a questioning eyebrow at him. "I'm sure it will taste much better if I have company to drink it."

She seemed to hesitate. After a look at the empty group table

behind them, she asked, “Just one glass, then?”

“Just one glass,” he confirmed. “If you’re not going to join your friends, it’ll help you pass the time until they return with their prey.”

She let out a snort and sat up again, turning toward Lucien. He started to imitate her but changed his mind, remaining fully toward the counter so there’d be no chance of her catching sight of his savaged neck. Why he’d want to hide what he was, if only for the time of a glass, he didn’t know. Maybe because she was attractive and he hadn’t had an attractive woman approach him for nothing more than conversation in… longer than he could remember. Maybe because he was accustomed to drinking good wine with company, keeping hard liquor for solitary nights.

“I’ll bet you a second glass of that expensive wine that none of them will come back with a vampire,” she said. “A couple might pick up a guy, but as much as they may think vampires are thrilling, it’ll seem very different when they have to talk to one.”

Lucien wasn’t so sure himself; vampires could be very good at pushing humans from ‘curious’ to ‘ready to experiment,’ as he knew quite well.

“You’re on,” he said just as the barmaid came back to him and took his order for two glasses of Shiraz.

“Are you good at picking wine, then?” the girl asked. “Or did you just go ‘Eeny, meeny, miny, moe’ to pick one?”

Chuckling again, he made a show of leaning back to get a look at the name across her back, and she obligingly shifted her shoulders to give him a better look.

“Well, Zoe, since you’re asking, I pride myself on knowing good wine.” He paused for effect then added with a self-deprecating grin, “Or at least, I memorized a few good years and I know which cépages I like best.”

The barmaid returned with their glasses, but neither Lucien nor Zoe paid her much mind.

“Cépage?” Zoe asked, glancing briefly to reach for her glass but soon returning her gaze to Lucien.

He picked up his own with an equally short look.

“The type of grapes. Sorry, a bit of my maternal tongue slipping through. Santé!”

He held his glass toward her for a toast, and she clinked hers against it before taking a sip. He did the same, but barely tasted anything as he waited for her verdict. She let it out in the form of a throaty little “Mmm” before taking another sip.

“Your maternal tongue…” She tilted her head to one side and exposed the lovely curve of her neck, causing Lucien to thirst for a very different kind of drink. “Is that… French? I think I can hear a tiny bit of accent in your words.”

He nodded. “Not many people do. It’s been a long time since I was there.”

“I always dreamed of visiting Paris,” she said, then gave a self-deprecating smile. “I guess everyone says that, huh?”

“A lot of people mention Paris, yes. But there’s more to France than that.”

He took another mouthful of wine to stop himself from going on a rant about how he’d personally never cared for the capital. Maybe the fact that he’d lost his life within two days of arriving there had something to do with that.

“So, your friend is getting married, then?” he asked, and if the question had an obvious answer at least it’d deflect the conversation away from him.

“She is, yes. Next weekend. I wasn’t sure that a vampire bar would be the best place for her last party as a single woman, but she’s friend with the owner, so…” She shrugged and looked around as she drank another sip of wine. “Not that there seems to be many vampires here, anyway.”

Without making much of an effort, Lucien could tell that there actually were two other vampires at the bar, and probably more around. While it was obvious to him, he understood that humans might not notice their unnatural stillness, or the lack of pulse beating at their necks, or the lack of heartbeat coming from them. Which made him wonder…

“How can you be sure?” he asked. “How do you know there aren’t

vampires around?"

She leaned a little closer to him and dropped her voice to a tipsy whisper.

"My father used to be a Special Enforcer. You know, a vampire hunter. He told me what to look for. And told me how dangerous they are, too. I mean, I guess not all vampires kill, but they can if they want to, you know? For them it's as easy as snapping their fingers."

Had he not thought she was charming, other than her hang-up over vampires, he would have let it pass, finished his glass, and said his goodbyes. But there was something about her he couldn't quite explain, something that attracted him even if he knew already how she'd react when she knew what he was.

"It's not that easy, no," he said with a half-smile.

She looked at him questioningly.

"Killing," he explained. "Even if it's in your power, it's not necessarily an easy thing to do. If I gave you a gun, could you go and murder a total stranger in cold blood?"

She pulled back, shock written large on her face.

"What? No! Of course not!"

"So what makes you think it's any easier to use fangs than a gun?"

Her mouth worked soundlessly and she frowned, clearly unsure where he was going with that. Or maybe she was realizing he spoke from personal experience.

"But… but… they're hungry," she finally said. "That's why they kill. They can't control themselves. It's in their nature."

"We don't need to kill to feed," he said with that same half-smile, knowing now that he was giving himself away. "Some vampires do, sure. They think it's fun, or they don't give a damn. Some don't bother trying to control themselves, or they don't see why they should have to, seeing as how that's what humans expect from them. But I assure you, we don't need to kill, and many of us don't want to, even if it means going hungry."

Never mind shock; it was pure horror he could now see on her expression.

"Your friends are back," he said, tilting his head toward the

giggling women coming back up from the dance floor. “Why don’t you join them? Unless you want me to come with you and see if you can win the game?”

He’d known of course that she wouldn’t want that, and wasn’t exactly surprised when she scrambled off the stool and joined her group. He didn’t look back. His smile fading away, he looked at her half-drunk glass of wine and poured it into his own. It’d take a lot more than that to numb his mind, but it was a good start.

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CHAPTER FIVE

Zoe's mind was buzzing, her legs felt shaky, and it had little to do with the alcohol. On automatic pilot, she returned to her seat next to the decorated 'throne' that was Joan's for the night and plopped herself there as the other bridesmaids returned as well, chatting and laughing. None seemed distressed that they hadn't managed to bring back a vampire, and Zoe could only wonder if any of them had even found a vampire to approach, down on the dance floor, or if they'd just gone to dance.

"You okay, sweetie?" Cathleen asked her, leaning close and watching her with such concerned eyes that Zoe mindlessly pushed a smile to her lips, the way she always did when someone looked at her like that.

"Just fine."

"You don't look fine. You look shaken. Did something happen? I didn't see you on the dance floor."

"I'm fine, I swear. Did you see Joan? Everyone's back except for her."

The deflection worked and Cathleen looked around as she replied.

"She didn't come down to dance either. I thought I saw her back there... Oh, here she comes!"

Cathleen's sudden exclamation, or the reason for her laughter, for any of the other girls' laughter, was lost on Zoe. On the other side of the table, almost directly across from her, the vampire had stood from the bar and pulled out his wallet. He left a bill on the counter before walking away. She held her breath, part of her convinced that he'd look toward her, that he might even come to her… but no, he made his way to the staircase without so much as a look back.

So why wasn't she breathing any better?

She'd sat next to a vampire. She'd talked to a vampire, laughed with a vampire… and nothing bad had happened. She'd had a nice

time, actually, up to the moment when he'd revealed who he was, and even then she'd felt more foolish than scared.

Another round of hilarity around her brought Zoe's attention back to her friends, and she looked up to the two women standing to her left, Joan and a blonde that Zoe had never seen before.

"…the clear winner," Joan was saying in between peals of laughter. "Did you gals even try?"

The woman next to her was smiling, giving the impression of an older sister amused at the antics of her younger siblings but too cool to laugh with them. Zoe knew at once who—what—she was. All the signs were there: a faded scar at the crook of her neck, a skin that wasn't so much pale as strangely translucent, no signs of breathing whatsoever…

Why was it so easy for Zoe to identify her as a vampire when she'd been woefully blind to her drinking companion's signs?

Joan introduced the vampire as Lisa, the 'partner' of the club's owner who'd given them such a good deal for the night. Loud cheering accompanied this introduction, and after some reshuffling of chairs, Lisa joined them at the table, "only for a little while," she warned.

As luck would have it, she ended up next to Zoe.

The waitress brought another round of drinks—light on alcohol, heavy on soda and fruit juice—and amiable chatter burst around the table as Joan was teased about bringing back a vampire whom she'd already known. Zoe kept a smile on her face and her hands clenched over her tall cocktail glass. She was fine. She was just fine. It wasn't as though the woman seated next to her was likely to attack her right here, in the middle of the bar, with so many people around them.

Come to think of it, it was unlikely the man at the bar would have attacked her, either.

"Do I really scare you that much?" the vampire—Lisa—asked in a whisper, tilting her head toward Zoe but without leaning in any closer than she already was.

"Of course you don't," Zoe replied with a forced laugh. It sounded so fake that she drowned it in a sip from her glass.

“Yes, I do,” Lisa persisted with a thin smile. “Your mouth says one thing, but your scent doesn’t lie. Or was it Lucien who scared you?”

Zoe blinked at her.

“Who?”

“Lucien? The man you were having a drink with at the bar? I saw you two chatting when I came in. You did know he’s a vampire, right?”

“I… Yes. He told me. But he didn’t tell me his name.”

Lisa’s smile took a wistful turn.

“I can’t say I’m surprised. You seemed to be getting along pretty well. Why didn’t you bring him to the table? You’d have won the game.”

Zoe’s mouth opened and worked soundlessly until she snapped it shut. It was all too easy to forget what Lisa was, especially right now, with all the girls around them. Was it a trick, something vampires used to lure their prey into a sense of complacency? But Lisa couldn’t really see her as prey, could she?

“You *are* scared,” Lisa said, her eyebrows furrowing as her smile faded. “Did something happen? Did Lucien—”

“No, no, he didn’t do anything.”

Why Zoe wanted to defend Lucien, she wasn’t sure, but somehow it felt important. Maybe because he’d been a perfect gentleman and she’d hate for Lisa to believe otherwise? But then, what should she care what a vampire thought of another vampire?

“I don’t get it,” she blurted out. “You… vampires kill. They need to kill to drink blood and survive. Why even pretend to be friendly when we’re… we’re… like cattle to you?”

Without realizing what she was doing, Zoe had allowed her voice to grow louder, and now every pair of eyes at the table was turned toward her. She could feel her cheeks heat up in embarrassment and couldn’t bear to stay there a minute longer. With a quiet, “Excuse me,” she pushed her chair away from the table and stood, walking a little faster than strictly necessary to the restrooms at the back of the club.

Once inside, she approached the row of marble-encased sinks and ran cold water over her hands and wrists before cupping it in her

hands and pressing her face to the water. Too late, she remembered her make-up, as minimal as it had been. Just one more way to embarrass herself then, especially as there were no mirrors in here, and she'd have no idea what she looked like when she managed to compose herself enough to walk out again.

She'd known, at the back of her mind, that she wouldn't be allowed to hide here alone very long; one of her friends would come and talk to her. When the two other occupants of the facilities walked out, however, keeping the door open for someone else to walk in, it wasn't one of Zoe's friends, not even Joan who came in, but Lisa.

She kept her distances, for which Zoe was grateful.

"I apologize," Zoe said, at the same time as Lisa asked, "Are you all right?"

Zoe shook her head.

"I'm all right, but I feel like a complete idiot. I didn't mean to insult you, and even less to make a scene out there. I'm sorry."

With another one of those thin, slightly wistful smiles, Lisa tugged two paper towels free from the holder and approached.

"You neither insulted me nor made a scene. You asked a question that is on the mind of many humans, even if few ever dare ask it like you did. May I?"

For a second, Zoe wasn't sure what she meant, but she understood when Lisa raised the paper towels, gesturing briefly toward Zoe's face. Every instinct in Zoe was telling her not to let Lisa any closer to her, but it was more than clear that Lisa had no violent intentions here. Shoving her instincts to the back of her mind, she gave a jerky nod and, clenching a hand on the edge of the counter, held herself very still as Lisa wet one of the towels and very gently dabbed at the underside of Zoe's eyes, where her mascara and eye shadow must have given her the infamous raccoon eyes.

"Vampires need blood to live," Lisa said slowly as she worked. "That much is true. And it happens sometimes that vampires, either on purpose or by accident, take too much blood from the humans they drink from and cause their death. I can't deny that. I'm sure that what you said is true, and that to some vampires, humans are no more than

cattle. My own Sire thought that way. But that doesn't mean we all do. There. All better. You have lovely eyes."

Despite herself, Zoe let out a quick bark of laughter at the compliment. This was all so strange…

"So what you're saying is… You never killed anyone?"

Lisa's small smile didn't waver, but her eyes lost some of their spark.

"Like I said, accidents happen. I've lived a long life, and I didn't always have the best control over my actions. But I can swear to you, on everything I hold dear, that neither I nor Lucien nor any vampire on the premises tonight will hurt you in any way, or take from you anything you didn't readily offer. If you don't trust us, at least trust that my security staff is well trained and more than capable to spot trouble before it has a chance of happening."

She hadn't admitted in so many words that she'd taken lives before, but she'd implied as much, and it was a very dangerous thing for her to do. Some Special Enforcers needed little more than this in guise of proof to carry out a death sentence against a vampire. Somehow, it felt as though she'd deliberately given Zoe a weapon against her. Now, they could both cause the other's death, but why should they?

It reminded Zoe of what Lucien had said earlier, about how having the power to take a life was much different from doing so, and now she thought she truly understood what he'd meant.

"I'm sorry," she said, and this time she meant it a great deal more. "I've been taught to think a certain way, and I'm starting to see that maybe I'm carrying some prejudices."

For the first time, Lisa's smile widened, filling with warmth.

"You're not the only one. And recognizing it is already a big step. Would you like to go back now? I think your friends were about to go dancing again."

They had gone back down, Zoe realized when they came out of the bathroom, or at least most of them had. Joan, Cathleen and Alicia were waiting nearby, their smiles a little less bright than they should have been. It made Zoe feel bad all over again, especially when Joan asked, "Are you all right, sweetie? If you want to leave—"

“No, no, please, I’m fine. I drank too much and let my tongue run, but I’m fine. A bit of cold water did wonders. How about some dancing? Shall we join the others?”

She was desperate for them not to make a big deal out of what had happened and they seemed to realize this as they didn’t insist. When they all started toward the staircase, Zoe couldn’t help looking back. Lisa was watching them go, and made a small gesture of her hand when she saw Zoe looking at her. Zoe returned it, still confused that a vampire could be so nice without it being an act.

Because, really, what reason did she have to come talk to Zoe? She could have let Joan or any of the others talk to her—surely any of the three women now walking with her down the metal staircases toward the dance floor would have done it. She couldn’t possibly expect that she’d get blood from Zoe out of that little talk, and why bother putting effort in reassuring a one-time customer from out of town, someone who was unlikely to come spend her money here after tonight?

For that matter, Zoe thought as she noticed Lucien standing on one of the catwalks looking down at the dancing crowd, why had *he* been nice to her, and invited her to have a drink when practically the first thing she’d said to him was disparaging toward vampires?

She suddenly had to know, had to understand. She spent her life, it seemed, questioning everyone’s motives in regards to her—Lisa talking kindly to her, Joan picking her as maid of honor, Jim being first so friendly and suddenly so hurtful without even realizing it were only the most recent examples—and she never dared ask anyone. Maybe it’d be easier asking a stranger. She doubted what he said would make any difference in anything, but… small steps, her therapist had said. Practice. Small goals that turned into victories and pushed her further toward self-confidence.

She squeezed Joan’s hand on her arm to get her attention and said, “I need to talk to someone for a moment. I’ll join you on the dance floor in a few minutes, all right?”

Joan gave her a questioning look but merely nodded, and the three of them went on down the last staircase while Zoe took a deep breath, steeled herself, and crossed the catwalk to go stand near Lucien. He

didn't turn toward her and continued to look down at the crowd, but she was sure he knew she was there. Something in the way he leaned against the railing changed, his posture stiffening slightly, becoming more rigid.

She cleared her throat, grabbed the railing with one hand to stop herself from turning away, and said his name, speaking loudly. With the music blaring on the dance floor and her reluctance to get too close, she figured she'd have to speak up for him to hear her—or would his better-than-human hearing compensate for that? But if he had better hearing than she did, how could he stand there and look so comfortable when the music was so loud? Didn't it hurt his ears or give him a headache? It was almost too loud for her and—

It took the snapping of his fingers in front of her to pull Zoe from the mental loop she'd let herself be drawn into, focusing on some random detail when she was uncomfortable with what she needed to do.

"I said," Lucien asked when she finally made eye contact with him, "how do you know my name?"

Her hand tightened on the railing. She'd meant to ask him a question, listen to his answer and leave, nothing more. But answering his question first couldn't be so bad. She could do this. She was safe, in plain view of everyone, and Lisa had mentioned the security staff. Yes, perfectly safe.

"Lisa told me. I meant to ask—"

"Lisa?" he interrupted her, his eyebrows rising. "Why were you talking to Lisa about me?" His features darkened and he looked around, suddenly wary. "Should I expect to be thrown out of here any minute now because I committed the crime of offering you a drink?"

At first, she thought he was making fun of her, but his wariness was real. He was worried about being kicked out—though he looked more resigned than upset.

"What? No, no, I was just… She saw us at the bar, and I…" She shook her head once and tried to get back on track. She wanted to know one thing, and then she'd leave him alone. "Just tell me. Why did you offer me that drink?"

He gave her a nonplussed look.

“Because you were about to order wine and so was I.”

She shook her head again.

“But you already knew I want nothing to do with vampires. Did you think you’d make me change my mind? Were you going to… to enthrall me, or something?”

Now, his expression turned a little amused.

“Right, I was going to thrall you in the middle of a busy bar, where everyone could see, and make you offer me your neck with pleas to bite you.” He sighed. “Zoe, a pretty girl sat next to me at a bar. She wanted a drink. I bought her one. What else is there to explain?”

For a second or two, she wondered why he was bringing up this other girl when she was asking why he’d bought her a drink—and then it dawned on her. He was talking about her. He was calling her pretty.

“You’re doing it again,” she accused, pointing a finger at him. “You’re being nice, trying to trick me into… into…”

They’d somehow come closer as they talked to hear each other better, and her index ended up brushing against his chest. Her voice trailed off when she realized what she was doing and she snatched back her hand, her cheeks warming up suddenly.

“How am I being nice? You’re asking me why I bought you a drink, I’m telling you why. That’s all.”

She searched his features, looking for the clue, the giveaway that he was making fun of her, but she saw none of that, merely confusion that she was still questioning him, and it confused her in return.

With a muttered, “I’m sorry,” she started to turn away. She didn’t know what she’d expected him to say, or even what she’d wanted him to say. She didn’t know either why she found it so hard to believe him.

Before she’d taken more than a step or two, he said her name and she had to look back.

“You lost your bet,” he said with that same half-smile as when he’d told her he was a vampire. “You said none of your friends would come back with a vampire, but one of them brought Lisa to the table. You

owe me a drink."

It wasn't a demand she could hear in his voice, not even an expectation. It was merely gentle teasing; the offer of a joke, one they could laugh at together.

She made herself return his smile. She wasn't up to another drink with him, but a smile and a joke… she could do that much if she tried.

"Maybe another time."

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CHAPTER SIX

On his first visit to On The Edge, Lucien did not find anyone to feed from—although in truth, he did not really look for prey that night, and merely got a feel for the club. He returned the next night, however, and every night after that, and two times out of three he found someone willing to offer him their neck or wrist. His scar still earned him double-takes, but more often than not it was curiosity he read in people's eyes rather than fear.

Lisa had not oversold the club, and it was as she'd promised: a place where humans and vampires mingled openly, and while some of the humans remained skittish around vampires, they were also curious.

The only disappointing encounter had been his first. Two weeks later he was still thinking about Zoe, still wondering if she'd felt the same kind of connection he had when they'd first shared a drink, but also why she was so scared of vampires, why she'd come to look for him later on despite that fear—and especially why she'd seemed so shocked when he had answered her question.

Her expression had been the same when he'd called her pretty as when he'd revealed he was a vampire. He almost wished he'd followed his instinct and used the word he truly meant, but she'd been so much on edge already, he doubted that having her believe he was hitting on her would have helped anything.

He hadn't found anyone that appealed as much to him since, and while a couple of women had hinted they might not object to spending the night at his place, he'd yet to take anyone up on it. After being alone for so long—after being lonely for so long—the prospect of having company for one night only wasn't particularly enticing. Maybe being around Lisa and seeing her have it all with one man, business partner, willing prey and bedmate, was giving him higher expectations…

On this Saturday night, he was at the bar, waiting to order a glass of wine, something which had become a sort of ritual for him to start his night at the club, when someone sat on the stool next to him.

"Good evening, Lucien. I believe I owe you a drink."

He turned, so surprised to find Zoe there that for a second or two he even thought his mind was playing tricks on him. She had on a lovely wraparound dress that put her curves to their best advantage. She wore a little more make-up than when he'd first met her, and he hadn't realized before that her hair was so long that it'd fall past her shoulders in thick ringlets when it was unbound, but it was her all right, down to her nervousness as she looked at him.

"Good evening," he replied, allowing his surprise to color his words. "I'll gladly share a drink with you, but I'll admit I didn't think you'd make good on your wager."

She let out a quiet chuckle.

"Yeah, well, let's just say you're not the only one who's surprised. I never thought I'd ever be back to this club."

The bartender approached them at this point, and Zoe deferred to Lucien's wine knowledge and asked him to order for them both. Only when they'd both been served did Lucien ask, "So why are you here then? Just to get me that promised drink?"

She'd been raising her glass to her lips, her hand shaking ever so slightly; she set it down again without taking a sip and turned a little more toward Lucien, the way she'd done that first time, before she had realized what he was.

"I am here," she said with a hint of formality in her voice, "to thank you."

When Lucien made a sound of polite surprise, she went on.

"I've been stuck in a rut for a long time. I mean, thinking the same things, going through the same routine, reacting the same way every time something happened. I needed something to break the pattern, and somehow, meeting you did the trick. You and Lisa made me see vampires in a different way and it was like… if I was wrong about this, if I could learn to shift the way I thought and acted about this one thing, then I could try to do the same with other areas of my life.

And that's what I've been doing these past couple of weeks. Small steps. Little changes. But it's all adding up, and I'm starting to feel… happy." Her smile lit up her whole face. "Really happy."

Lucien didn't know what he could possibly reply to that, so he returned her smile and raised his glass.

"To happiness, then," he said, and she clinked her glass against his.

"I know it doesn't mean anything to you," she said after they'd both taken sips from the wine, "but I felt like telling it to someone I don't pay to listen to me." She eyed their glasses and her smile took a self-deprecating turn. "Well, I guess I *am* paying for you to listen to me."

This time, responding was easy. Lucien caught the bartender's attention and, before Zoe could react, he'd paid for both their drinks.

"What about my lost bet!" she protested.

Lucien grinned at her.

"Maybe another time."

She laughed.

***

Trying not to show how put-off she was, Zoe took a long sip from her wine.

Tonight was her fifth visit to On The Edge, and for the first time Lucien had picked a white wine for them. She wasn't sure she liked it. The red ones had always seemed smoother on her tongue. Or maybe it was what had happened that changed her perception of the wine; after all, she'd liked it just fine until that girl had approached them.

"Why did she call you Luke?" she asked, keeping her eyes on the glass she was rotating between her fingers rather than turning to look at Lucien.

Why did she look like she would climb on your lap if you just let her, was what she wished she could have asked, but what right did she have to ask such a question?

"That's the name I use at the club," he said, and from the corner of her eye she saw him shrug. "Everywhere, really. Most people pronounce my name wrong, and they ask endless questions about

where I'm from and so forth. It's easier to go with something more neutral. Plus I've been a fan of Star Wars from the first movie onward."

She could hear the grin in his last words, and she knew it was an invitation to banter about movies yet again; she might admire his wine-picking skills, but as far as she was concerned his movie preferences were terrible. They'd spent a lot of time talking about that, about books and music, the many places he'd visited and the few that she had. She didn't feel like bantering right now, however. Instead, she felt even more put-off than she had a minute ago.

"I asked where you were from when we first met," she pointed out. "Did I bore you to death, too? What about your name? Am I saying it wrong? Should I call you Luke like that—"

She stopped herself short and pinched her lips closed tightly before she could finish with an unflattering name. Bimbo was on the tip of her tongue, and she refused to say it, or anything so demeaning. She'd been on the receiving end of mean words too often to succumb to the temptation.

At her side, Lucien made a sound, like a sudden intake of breath, except he never breathed, and he never even pretended to appear to be human. He'd told her he used to but had long ago decided to simply be who he was, which she could relate to quite a lot.

"You're jealous," he said when she peeked at him, something like awe in his voice. "You're actually jealous of that girl, aren't you?"

She huffed and shifted on her bar stool.

"Of course I'm not," she protested, with the vague hope that he might think her blush was a product of outrage rather than embarrassment. "You're allowed to have friends other than me."

Of course he was allowed to have friends, she repeated to herself. She wasn't merely saying that. Just because the mere thought of it was unpleasant didn't change the fact that he owed her nothing. And she, even after all this time, still owed him a drink.

"Well, if it makes you feel any better," Lucien said very seriously but sounding oddly pleased, "she and I are not what I'd call friends. She's just someone I—"

He stopped abruptly enough that Zoe turned in her seat to look at him, waiting for him to finish. Giant moths were battling in her stomach, making her regret drinking half her wine glass so fast. Someone he what? Knew? Was friendly with? Fucked every other night of the week, when Zoe couldn't make the trip to Haventown because it was too far to come more often than once a week, however much she wished she could?

"Someone I feed from every now and then," he finished, sotto-voce, holding her gaze.

His eyes held no trace of apology, not that she would have expected any, but he did seem wary, the same way he had, that first night, when he'd thought she'd get security to throw him out of the club. What was he afraid of, now? She figured it out quickly enough when he added, "Is that all right with you?"

A little voice inside Zoe's mind that sounded like a mix of her father and brother tried to tell her that of course it wasn't all right, there was nothing all right about that. Not very long ago, she'd have been unable to silence that little voice, but she'd learned, and it was getting easier and easier to shove all those imagined outside voices in a box and slam the lid shut.

"Yes," she heard herself say. "Of course it's all right. You have to eat, and if that girl or anyone else is willing, I have no right to say anything about it."

To her own ears, she sounded convincing, and still Lucien looked at her like he could see the lie inscribed in every square inch of her features. He didn't say anything, merely looked at her, and after a few seconds had passed in an increasingly tense silence, Zoe dropped her gaze.

"You have to eat," she repeated, more quietly. "But I can't say I enjoy imagining your mouth on that girl's neck, or wrist, or anywhere else."

Again, he remained silent. She didn't dare look up, not until, with a gentle finger brushing her chin, he guided her face up toward his.

"How about my mouth on yours?" he murmured. "Is that something you ever imagine? Because I do. All the time."

She blinked repeatedly, her gaze going back and forth between his eyes and his mouth. Surely the moths, or butterflies, or whatever imaginary wings had taken residence inside her should have been beating even faster, but she felt an odd calm sweep over her. Her jealousy was forgotten along with the remains of her fears when Lucien, leaning forward, brushed the most elusive of kisses to her mouth.

He drew back and looked at her, checking perhaps, that she was okay with this.

She answered the unvoiced question the best way she knew how, by leaning in toward him and initiating a second kiss. This time, it wasn't so elusive anymore, but just as tender, the same flavor of wine lingering on their tongues when they ever-so-tentatively met for a few gentle seconds.

As they separated, something passed between them. They weren't going to talk about this kiss, Zoe knew right away. They weren't going to talk about what it meant, or even whether it would happen again. They didn't need to, because they both knew already that, maybe later tonight, maybe next week, it would.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

That night, excitement coursed in Zoe's veins when she left her car in the parking lot of On The Edge. She was a little later than usual in part because she'd run into Jim as she was about to leave. He'd once again tried to invite her to have dinner with him, insisting even after she'd told him, yet again, that she valued his friendship but didn't want to push things any further than that. At this point, the truth was that even his friendship was too much for her.

For the past few weeks, she'd made her exercising schedule as random as she could, sometimes going down to the gym at an unholy morning hour before work, sometimes going late in the evening, when she could be reasonably sure he wouldn't be there. He still managed to find her every so often, and every time he asked her out, as though by repeatedly saying no she was only teasing him and enticing him a little more.

The thought of his continued insistence was threatening her good mood and she pushed it out of her mind, focusing instead on the other reason why she'd been late in leaving for the two hour drive. All week she'd thought about what she'd wear and what she'd pack, and her overnight bag had been waiting by the door when she'd come home. But instead of having a quick dinner, changing into a nice dress and leaving, she'd repacked the bag as she'd thought about doing all day long at work, and picked a different dress in her closet than the one she'd laid out on her bed that morning.

Not that she had many to choose from, really. Clothes that looked good on her were hard to find, and clothes that looked good and were suitable for a dance club, even more so. She cycled between the same four dresses, not even pretending to herself that Lucien wouldn't notice because he always noticed everything—new earrings after Chistmas, new haircut when she'd only had the stylist trim a couple of inches as she was always scared of doing anything too drastic, new

shoes whose heels, higher than she was used to, made her wobble a little, even one night the shadow of a bruise on her ankle from where she'd bumped into something when climbing off the elliptical machine.

The next five minutes had been spent trying to explain to an increasingly more perplexed Lucien what on Earth an elliptical was, until, out of breath from laughing too much, she'd pulled out her phone and googled it for him. His confusion hadn't abated, and neither had her laughter in front of his reaction.

It was because he was so observant that she'd finally made up her mind, or at least, it was in part because of that. He'd shown himself attentive and funny, and interested in all the stories she told him, and full of interesting stories to share in return. When he looked at her, she never wondered whether he saw the extra pounds she carried, or simply her. When he kissed her, she never wondered if he was doing it out of pity for the poor overweight girl that couldn't get a date and would be grateful enough to do anything he asked later on.

He hadn't asked anything of her, but for the past four months he'd always seemed ever so pleased when she showed up at the club. She couldn't wait to see how surprised he'd be that she'd come one day early. And she couldn't wait to see how he'd react when she asked him if he'd take her to his bed tonight.

She'd practiced saying the words in front of her mirror. She'd repeated them to herself at work, becoming more and more distracted as the day advanced. She'd said them aloud as she drove to Haventown, pressing harder on the accelerator than she should have on a busy highway. And in a few minutes, she'd say them to him in person.

With a spring to her steps, she entered the club and its now familiar ambiance, the chatter, laughter, clinking of glasses and music meddling together in a comfortable background. She headed to the bar, looking around for Lucien, wondering if she'd have to go hunt him down on the dance floor. They rarely danced together; she wasn't a very good dancer, and he claimed not to enjoy dancing all that much, so they were both content to spend most of their time at the

bar, slowly exploring the wine list one glass at a time and talking endlessly about anything and everything.

She saw him as she reached the bar and the stools they usually claimed as theirs. He was in the back of the room, in one of those small booths that could be made semiprivate with translucent curtains.

And he wasn't alone.

Her knees feeling a little weak suddenly, as though she'd already drunk her customary glass of wine and two or three more as chasers, she sat on her stool, her back now to that part of the room and its booths. Her heart was trying to break free from her chest, and when the barmaid approached her, all she could think of ordering was a glass of water. Maybe it'd calm her nerves and allow her to think.

She wasn't upset, she was shocked to realize once she'd taken a few sip of the ice cold water in front of her. She didn't even believe for one second that Lucien might have been seeing other girls on the nights when she didn't come to Haventown—or at least, not the way he was seeing her.

No, she knew exactly who this woman was: Lucien's prey. He didn't hunt on the nights they met, but he'd never hidden from her that he came to the club almost every other night to feed.

"It's all right," she whispered to herself. "He's not hurting anyone. What he's doing is perfectly legal and he's not on any Special Enforcer tracking list."

"I'm not?"

She shrieked when he spoke right next to her ear, and nearly toppled off the high stool. Before she was even conscious of losing her balance, Lucien's hand was at her waist, steadying her gently.

"Sorry," he said, looking contrite. "I didn't mean to startle you."

His hand lingered a little longer on her, slipping to her back and resting there, ever so light and impossible to ignore.

"I didn't expect…"

She gulped, her cheeks warming up as she saw that a few eyes had turned toward them in mild curiosity. They soon looked away again and she went on quietly.

“I thought you were… busy. That you’d be busy for a while. I didn’t expect you to come to the bar so soon.”

She swallowed back a sigh of loss when he lifted his hand off her and sat at her side.

“I didn’t expect you to come so soon either,” he said, a little amused now. “Or did I miss a day somewhere and this is actually Saturday?”

She shook her head. The words she’d practiced so many times were on the tip of her tongue, but the scenario didn’t match up what she’d imagined and she found herself unable to say it now.

“I thought I’d surprise you,” she murmured instead.

He let out a quiet huff of a laugh.

“Well, you certainly did that.”

As the barmaid approached, he ordered red wine for them; he’d noticed she preferred it to white. He then turned a rather serious look toward her.

“So, what you were saying when I approached. About Special Enforcer tracking lists. Would you care to explain?”

She suddenly found herself wishing that she’d told him about the chosen profession of her father and brother before, but that was one topic she’d ignored even as she talked of anything else without restraint. She had to tell him now, however, and she did.

“I didn’t mean to spy on you,” she added when she was finished, intensely aware of the slight frown marring his brow. “I just thought… Well, if you and I… if we become more serious… I mean, if we get in a relationship, a lasting one… You’ll probably have to meet my family at some point, and they’d know. Jack and my dad, I mean, they’d figure it out and the first thing they’d do was check if you’re on a list of known killers. So I figured I’d check first.”

Their drinks arrived at that point, for which she was thankful. Something else arrived at the same time—someone else—and this arrival was much less pleasant. Her drink halfway to her lips, she froze, her eyes widening as she saw Jim approaching the counter. Lucien had started to say something, but he stopped and followed her gaze.

“Let me guess,” he said, dry humor in his whisper. “Your Special Enforcer brother?”

She almost wished it had been that easy.

“No, actually, that’s my neighbor.”

Jim looked in somewhat of a temper as he circled the bar and came to stand by Lucien and her. They both turned to face him, and Zoe noticed the contemptuous sweeping look he gave Lucien before focusing on her.

“Is that it, then?” he asked, gesturing at Lucien, before she could ask him what on Earth he was doing there. “You string me along for months, and the whole time you were seeing this guy on the side?”

“String you along?” she repeated, stunned. “I never— How did you even know I was here? Did you follow me?”

“Or maybe she’s playing both of us,” he said, ignoring her to address Lucien. “Is she giving you the ‘let’s just be friends’ refrain too when you try to take things to the next level? I’d wonder if she’s got more guys on the side but two has to be miraculous for her.”

Lucien looked somewhere between shocked and confused. Zoe wondered what he’d have answered if Jim had given him the chance to speak, but he continued to rant, attracting the attention of more people around them. Zoe felt absolutely mortified at being the center of such a scene, and it only grew worse when Jim’s voice rose higher with his next words.

“Months,” he said again, almost spitting the word. “Months of helping her and being nice to her when she was so completely clueless and alone. You should have seen her the first time she came to the gym, all decked out in those ridiculously stretched exercise clothes and trying to act like she belonged, and—”

“That’s enough.”

Electricity shot down Zoe’s spine at Lucien’s words. They sounded like distant thunder, low in volume but rumbling with menace. He slipped off his stool and stood directly in front of Jim, towering almost a foot over him. Jim didn’t back off and closed his fists.

“You’re going to apologize to the lady,” Lucien continued in the same tone. “And then you’re going to get the hell out of here and

leave her alone."

It was as though the entire bar had come to a standstill when Lucien climbed off his stool, as though they were all holding their breath—Zoe with the rest of them, patrons and staff alike. Jim squared out his shoulders, pushing out his torso as he glared at Lucien.

"Why would I apologize to a who—"

The rest of that ugly word was lost in a strangled gasp. Jim's eyes widened almost comically as he stumbled back, though Zoe couldn't understand why. Lucien had not lifted a finger toward him.

"Freak!" Jim cried out, pointing at Lucien and looking around for help. "He's a freak! A vampire! He's going to attack me!"

Something shifted inside Zoe. For him to call her names was bad enough, but that he'd do the same to Lucien when he knew nothing about him whatsoever was intolerable. Maybe even more so because only a few months ago Zoe might have thought the same way, even if she would never have used that word.

"He's not doing anything to you," she snapped, sliding off the stool to stand by Lucien's side. "If anyone is dangerous here, it's *you*. What kind of guy follows his neighbor for two hours after she's repeatedly told him she wasn't interested?"

"I'd say the technical term is 'stalker,'" a tall man answered while Jim sputtered an incomprehensible answer.

The man wore a black t-shirt with the club's name over the left side and below it, 'Security'. He crossed his arms, making his biceps bulge noticeably.

"I'm going to have to ask you to leave, sir. We tolerate neither stalkers nor ranting bigots on the premises."

Jim's shock was wonderful to witness.

"Me?" He gestured toward Lucien again. "You don't get it, he's a *vampire*! He's the one you should be throwing out!"

"Will you be walking to the exit," the security guard asked in a bored voice, "or do I need to carry you there, sir?"

In the end, Jim left on his own two feet, with the guard following closely behind him, and loud applause from the people around the bar

celebrated his exit. He threw one last look at Zoe before walking out of the club, a look full of anger, shame and resentment that caused her to shiver.

"Are you all right?" Lucien asked, his hand returning to her back to rub gently.

"Yeah, I…" She was trembling as they both resumed their seats. Her throat felt parched and she took a sip of wine. Her hand shook so much that she almost spilled it. "Wow. Sorry about that. I never imagined he'd do anything so crazy."

"You have nothing to be sorry for. Unless you really did string him along like he said."

Outraged, she turned to glare at Lucien, only to find him grinning, both hands held up in surrender.

"Joking. Just trying to lighten up the mood." He took a second look at her and his grin faded. "Although maybe I'm not going at it the right way. Are you sure you're all right?"

"As much as I can be given the circumstances," she said, mollified. "And for the record, I never gave him any sort of hope I might like him as anything other than a friend. I thought I was even pretty clear when I started avoiding him so I wouldn't have to constantly say no."

Lucien considered her for a moment, then looked at the entrance of the bar, frowning.

"And you said he's your neighbor? Maybe it'd be better if you didn't go home alone tonight. Is there a friend you could call, sleep at their place or have them accompany you home? Your brother maybe? I'd offer myself but it might be like throwing oil on a fire."

Zoe's heart jumped and started beating to the same fast rhythm that rose from the lower level. This was not at all the way she'd envisioned things would go, but after all she had a way to avoid going anywhere near Jim tonight.

"Actually, I was thinking… I was thinking I might spend the weekend in Haventown." She took in a shaky breath and made things completely clear. "With you."

Emotions flashed through his eyes, and had she not known him so well, she might not have recognized them: joy like a warm glow,

excitement like a flame, a touch of surprise. It all faded and his expression grew almost wary.

"As much as I'd like that, I think there's something you should know before we go any further."

Zoe's throat tightened. She gave a slight nod, inviting him to continue, although she couldn't help but fear what he was about to say.

"You looked me up in the database and you found nothing," Lucien said quietly. "But those things only go back a few decades. I'm a lot older than that, and when I was first turned I did things that would certainly have put me on those Special Enforcer lists."

Her mind was spinning all of a sudden, and she couldn't have forced a word past her lips even to save her own life. In her silence, Lucien continued to observe her and went on.

"New vampires are taught how to hunt by their Sire. They learn to feed without killing, or they learn that killing is their birthright depending on what their Sire believes, and then as they grow older they figure out their own way. Or at least, that's how it's supposed to be. My Sire wasn't there when I woke up as a vampire. I don't know why he turned me. I don't know why he didn't stick around. All I knew back then was that I was hungry, and nothing but blood could satisfy my hunger. So I took blood. And because I didn't know any better, I took lives. Remember what I told you when we first met? About how being able to kill doesn't mean it's easy? I hated it. I hated what I had become, and every time I killed someone, I promised myself it was the last time. But then I'd grow hungry again, and starving myself only made it harder not to kill when I caved in. It's a miracle I didn't get caught and killed, seeing how sloppy I was. But as I grew older, I learned control. I met other vampires, vampires who didn't kill, and I saw a different path opening in front of me. I chose that path. And I've stayed on it ever since."

"Why…"

Zoe couldn't offer more than this one syllable.

"Why did I choose not to kill?" Lucien guessed. "Because when I was human, I thought of myself as a good man. I wanted to be that

again."

She gave the tiniest shake of her head.

"No, why are you telling me this?" she finally managed to utter. "It's not in the database. I'd never have known if you didn't tell me."

"But you would have wondered, wouldn't you? You talked of us having a relationship, and I want that. You have no idea how much I want that. But not if it means hiding things from you, or lying to you. Now you know, and you can decide if going home with me is really what you want."

Was it? She couldn't tell anymore. She remembered thinking that all vampires were killers, then coming around to the realization that things might not be so black and white, and that there might be 'good' vampires, and now…

And now what? A little voice inside her demanded. And now you know that the man you're attracted to made mistakes in his life before deciding to follow a better path?

But what if he stumbles, she objected to that little voice. Earlier, he scared Jim. He must have done something, shown him his fangs or—

Exactly. He scared him. He didn't lay a finger on him, didn't hurt him in any way, but he still got rid of him, and all that because he'd insulted you. Who's scarier here, the human who stalked you after pretending to be your friend or the vampire who admitted he made mistakes when he knew it might drive you away?

Something of this internal debate must have transpired on her expression, because after a few seconds Lucien said very quietly, "It's okay, Zoe. It's all fine. Maybe another time."

She could hear the resignation in his voice. He was offering her a way out. All she had to do was take it.

Instead, she took his hand. Her own didn't shake anymore when she squeezed his fingers very gently.

"No. There's no time like the present."

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CHAPTER EIGHT

The most peculiar feeling took hold of Lucien when he accompanied Zoe back to her car, not to say goodbye as he usually did, but to get in with her, and guide her to his apartment. Part of him wanted to ask again if she was certain, to make sure, absolutely sure that she wouldn't change her mind later, or even regret things in the morning. But he had asked already, he reminded himself. He'd asked and she had answered, her voice trembling ever so slightly but her eyes direct and confident.

In the end, the confirmation he so sorely wanted came when they arrived at the building where he'd been renting an apartment for the past nine years. When she opened the trunk of her car and pulled out a small travel bag, he realized that this might not be the impulsive decision he'd thought she was making.

She caught sight of his expression as she came to him and gave him a shy little smile. The last of his reservations dissolved. He took the handle of the bag in one hand, her hand in the other, and led her to the entrance of the building then up the two flights of steps. Her hand felt very warm in his, and he could hear her heart, beating a tiny bit faster than usual, maybe, but not so fast as to indicate fear.

He had to let go of her hand to unlock and open the door, and he made up for that lack of contact by stealing a quick peck of a kiss from her lips. Her heart jumped in the same way it had every time he'd kissed her at the bar, or kissed her goodbye as they stood by her car. He doubted he'd ever tire of that little jig it played just for him.

"After you," he murmured, and, pushing the door open, invited her to go in with a gesture of his hand.

She did and he followed, flicking on the lights and grimacing when he took a look around.

"I wasn't expecting visitors," he said, apologetic. "Sorry about the mess."

Leaving her travel bag against the wall, he darted across the living room, picking up a handful of books from the floor and gathering them into a pile on the coffee table. He was about to grab the blood-stained mug he'd abandoned there the previous night and take it to the kitchen when Zoe caught his hand and tugged lightly, drawing his attention to her.

"Hey," she murmured. "It's fine. I didn't come here to play decor police."

He smiled at her small joke and, turning fully toward her, cupped her face in his hand.

"Why did you come here, then?" he asked, and he was only half teasing. "Earlier you talked of having me meet your family, but even if I do… we'll never have the same relationship you could have with a human, you do realize that, don't you? I'm not going to grow old with you, I'm not going to give you children, I'm not going to change. I'll always be the same person who scared you so much when you realized I was a vampire."

She nodded, pressing her cheek into his hand.

"I know that. But the thing is, I'm not the same person I was when I got scared. I changed, or at least the way I think did, just a little. And the important part for me is that you never asked me to change. You never asked anything from me. You let me come to you, you didn't push me, you didn't make demands. You were honest when it could have cost you everything, even your life if I decided to repeat what you told me to a Special Enforcer." She swallowed hard, and her voice grew to a husky whisper. "And I think… all of this… that's why I'm in love with you."

In a way, this sweet revelation didn't come as a surprise to Lucien. He'd guessed, a few weeks ago, that Zoe's feelings were deepening every time they met, as were his own. What did surprise him on the other hand was how easy it felt to offer the words to her in return. He couldn't remember the last time he'd said them to anyone, but they flowed off his tongue as though there was nothing more natural than for a vampire to fall in love with a human.

Then again, what *was* more natural than to fall in love?

“I love you too.”

As she blinked furiously, her eyes gleaming wetly, he dropped his hands to her waist and drew her closer to him. He leaned in and pressed his mouth to hers in what started as their sweetest kiss yet, but soon grew more heated, more passionate than any kiss they’d ever shared. Was it because, at last, he wasn’t holding anything back from her anymore?

His skin burned everywhere he touched her. Her warmth was searing, and he couldn’t get enough of it, as though after all these years he’d finally stop feeling so cold.

“I want to take you to my bed,” he whispered against her lips.

“Yes.”

“I want to make love to you”

She closed her eyes briefly. Her heart skipped a beat.

“Please yes.”

“And when we’re done, I want to start all over again.”

Her little moan, part frustration and part need, zinged straight to his cock.

“Lucien, please.”

Taking hold of her hand, he brought it to his lips, pressed a kiss to her knuckles, and led her to his bedroom.

***

The moment Lucien flicked on the light in the bedroom, Zoe had to bite her lips not to ask him to turn it off.

It wouldn’t matter, she reminded herself. Vampires could see very well in the dark.

Besides, she wanted to see him, too.

It still didn’t stop her from feeling more and more nervous as they approached the wide bed and its tucked in hunter green sheets. It had been quite a while since she’d been naked in front of a man—and the aftermath of her last experience was not a pleasant memory.

“Zoe?”

Lucien’s voice was a gentle whisper, belied only by the intensity of

his gaze as it pierced her, looking straight down to her soul.

"You're scared," he said, still as quietly, and it wasn't a question.

"Not scared." She squeezed his fingers between hers and forced out a smile. "Just… Intimacy has never been too easy for me. I want this, but…"

She couldn't spell it out, the words were too hard to form, and she found herself saying something altogether different—voicing a question that had been at the back of her mind for months.

"The night we met, you said… you called me pretty." She held his gaze, however hard it was. "Did you mean it?"

One corner of his mouth twitched upward.

"What I meant to say was beautiful, but I figured you'd think it was just a pickup line."

Yes, she would have thought as much, back then. Or she'd have thought he was making fun of her. But now that she knew him, now that she could tell from his voice, from the light in his eyes when he was joking or serious, she could accept this word, a word she'd rejected whenever it'd been offered to her before, and believe it.

When she kissed him, this time, it was as much a thank you for being so improbably perfect for her as it was because she needed to be closer to him—as close as two people could possibly get.

With their mouths still playing against each other, their tongues still caressing one another, she slipped her hands between them and started undoing the buttons of his shirt. In no time at all, she'd undone each of them and she was pushing his shirt off his shoulders and to the floor. She allowed her hands to roam over the hard planes of his chest for a moment, but touch wasn't quite enough. She wanted to see.

Breaking off the kiss, she put space between them, just enough that she could trail her fingertips up his abs, over his pecs, all the way up to his throat where silky skin gave way to that ragged scar that had become so familiar to her in the past months. She met Lucien's eyes, checking that what she wanted to do was okay, and shivered at the flames she could see dancing in his eyes. It ought to have scared her, an all too clear reminder of what he was, but she never even paused

and went on to explore the irregular patch of skin as gently as she knew how.

"I'm not hurting you, am I?" she murmured, looking up into those fiery eyes again.

"No," Lucien said, the word rumbling like a purr. "You're not hurting me at all. But I think it might be my turn."

He'd kept his hands at his sides so far, out of the way of her explorations, but now he took her hand and made her turn on the spot until her back was to him. She kicked off her shoes and held still as he tugged the zipper of her dress down.

"Breathe," he whispered against her hair, and she realized she was holding her breath.

She let it out in a quick burst of nervous laughter. Her dress began sliding off her and by pure reflex she raised her arms, stopping its descent, before she forced herself to let it go. Her heartbeat accelerated as Lucien's fingers played over her back, tracing arabesques that brought his fingers to the clasp of her bra. Despite herself, Zoe found herself holding her breath again when, without moving from behind her, Lucien removed her bra, then crouched down to guide her panties down her legs.

For a few seconds, she stood bare with her back to him, then slowly, deliberately, turned around, trying to ignore her embarrassment and fear that Lucien might find her lacking. He was still crouching and she had to look down to meet his gaze. She was shocked at the trace of awe that she saw there—at the lust that radiated from him, the need that filled his voice when he said her name. How could he make her feel beautiful and wanted with just her name? She didn't know, but whatever fears she'd been holding on to disappeared at last.

As he stood up again, hunger burning in his eyes, she took his hands and guided them to her breasts. His touch electrified her, not because it had been a very long time, not because his hands were cool against her heated flesh, but because it was *him*, and it was her, and she'd dreamed of this moment every night this week since making her decision. She'd dreamed of a lot more than that, too.

As he caressed her breasts, teasing her by coming close to her nipples without actually touching them, she bit her bottom lip to keep the moans that wanted to escape her silent and reached for the fastenings of his pants. But if she'd divested him of his shirt without problem, a single button and zipper proved much harder to undo now that her hands were shaking, her knees starting to buckle at the feel of the hardness hiding behind that zipper. Distracted, she abandoned the zipper and slid her hand past the waistband of his pants. She closed her eyes as her fingers wrapped around him and squeezed, but opened them again when Lucien took his hands off her and caressed her lip with a finger right where she was biting it.

"Oh, no," he said softly. "None of that now. I want to hear you."

She licked her lips, flicking the tip of her tongue at his fingertips, before letting out one word.

"Please…"

What she was asking for, she couldn't really have explained, but somehow Lucien understood. Taking her hand, he pulled the sheets down then helped her onto the bed. He quickly got rid of the last of his clothing, and she had the most tantalizing look at his cock, thick, uncut and standing at attention, before he joined her on the bed.

Their mouths found each other again as he lay against her, propped up onto one elbow, and it became hard to focus on the feel of his lips and tongue when his entire body was pressing against hers: cool when she was burning, hard where she was soft, but just as needy, just as excited as she was. For a few seconds, she kept her hands off him, fisting the sheets, but she needed to touch him and she couldn't resist very long.

Sparks ignited low in her belly when she ran her hands up and down Lucien's back, all the way to his ass, where tight muscles flexed under her touch even as he bucked lightly against her. She moaned at the feel of his cock rubbing against her hip, smooth as a polished marble rod, and just as hard. Her thighs were slick with her own desire and she parted them, allowing Lucien that much closer to her core. He drank her moans as though they were fine wine before letting out a rumbling of his own.

“I wanted to taste you,” he murmured against her lips, still bucking against her. “I wanted to devour the sweet wetness I can smell on your folds and make you come with nothing but my tongue. I wanted to make you cry out my name.”

She found his eyes, and they were nothing but flames by now.

“What… what’s stopping you?”

“You are. The sounds you make, the way you move against me, your touch…”

With something that was almost a growl, he stole another kiss from her, thrusting his tongue in her mouth twice and making her writhe under him.

“I can’t wait a second longer,” he said very low. “I need to have you now. May I? Please say yes, Zoe. Please let me take you.”

Zoe’s fingers tightened on his shoulders. She nodded frantically even as she struggled to let out a quiet, “Yes, God yes.”

The same clever fingers that had teased her breasts now caressed their way down her body and between them. Lucien held her gaze as he gathered wetness on his fingertips and slowly, much too slowly, pushed them inside her.

“Your cock,” she demanded, pressing up against him. “I want your cock. You said you want to take me, so—”

She finished with a cry of pleasure when Lucien took her at her word and, with a twist of his hips, lined up his cock with her slick passage and thrust in. She arched up, drawing him further even as she gasped his name. She felt stretched to her limits but at the same time she could have sworn their bodies had been made for each other. He’d only just entered her and already every nerve ending inside her was singing at his touch, craving more.

He started moving against her, inside her, piercing her with his cock and his eyes, caressing her with his hands and mouth, touching her face and her breasts, her nipples and her clit, offering pleasure with all of his body until she was practically vibrating with it. Warmth and pressure built inside her and all she could do was hold on to him and allow him to take her, as he’d asked.

Next time, she promised him silently, next time she’d caress him as

he did her, next time she'd press her mouth to his skin, kiss him everywhere she could reach, maybe even rake her teeth over him. Next time she'd make him feel as good as he did her, make him feel special, and cherished, and—

"You're doing that now, mon amour," he murmured, and she realized she'd been saying all that aloud in between gasps and moans.

"Next time," she said, panting, "or maybe the time after that… some day… I might… I might let you bite me."

She hadn't planned the words, hadn't even known she would say them before they passed her lips, and she was shocked to hear herself offer this—as shocked as Lucien seemed, suddenly frozen above her, his eyes wide and his mouth open.

He didn't say a word but crashed his mouth against hers at the same time as he thrust in, hard and deep, his pelvis pressing against her clit even as his cock filled her one last time. She couldn't have said which of them triggered the other's orgasm, not when pleasure swept everything away, leaving only peace in its wake.

It was a long time before either of them stopped shaking, and longer still before Lucien pulled away from her. He pressed a kiss to the tip of her nose, causing her to giggle, and left the bed briefly. He came back with a warm washcloth that he used to clean her up before drawing the sheets over her and joining her, each of them on their side and looking at the other.

"What you said…" he murmured. "You don't have to."

"You said you wanted to taste me," she replied, teasing him to hide how unsure she was.

"I do. I always will. But I never want you to be afraid of me, of what I could do to you. I never want you to flinch when I do this—" He leaned forward to press a kiss to her neck. "—because you think I might bite you."

She didn't know what to say, so she merely kissed him, a sweet, lazy kiss, before shifting closer to rest in his arms. The night was still young; after they rested for a little while, maybe she would be the one tasting him…

As her eyes closed, however, she couldn't help but say, so quietly

that he might pretend not to hear her, “Maybe another time.”

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Kallysten's most exciting accomplishment to date was to cross a few thousand miles and an ocean to pursue (and catch!) the love of her life. She has been writing for fifteen years, and always enjoyed sharing her stories and listening to the readers' reactions. After playing with science fiction, short stories and poetry, she is now trying her hand, heart and words at paranormal romance novels.

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Ms. Gina Kincade has been writing erotic paranormal romance books and erotic short stories since she was seventeen years old. Her first and second traditional publications were erotic short stories in a well-respected men's magazine under an alternate pseudonym.

She writes everything from contemporary mainstream romance, to high heat M/F, M/M, Ménage, BDSM, and fetish. Her evil little vampires and were-creatures will rip out your heart without thinking twice and then engage in steamy, explicit sex scenes.

Gina writes under a total of five pseudonyms to-date in other genres, including YA and children's.

A busy mom to three children, she lives in her wild household of two rambunctious dogs, a devoted, loving cat who believes herself to be royalty, and twelve crazy little chickens. She loves healthy home cooking, gardening, warm beaches, fast cars, and horseback riding.

Gina is also the C.E.O of Naughty Nights Press, a quality publisher of erotica, contemporary romance, and paranormal fiction.

Ms. Kincade's life is full, time is never on her side, and she wouldn't change a moment of it!

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